

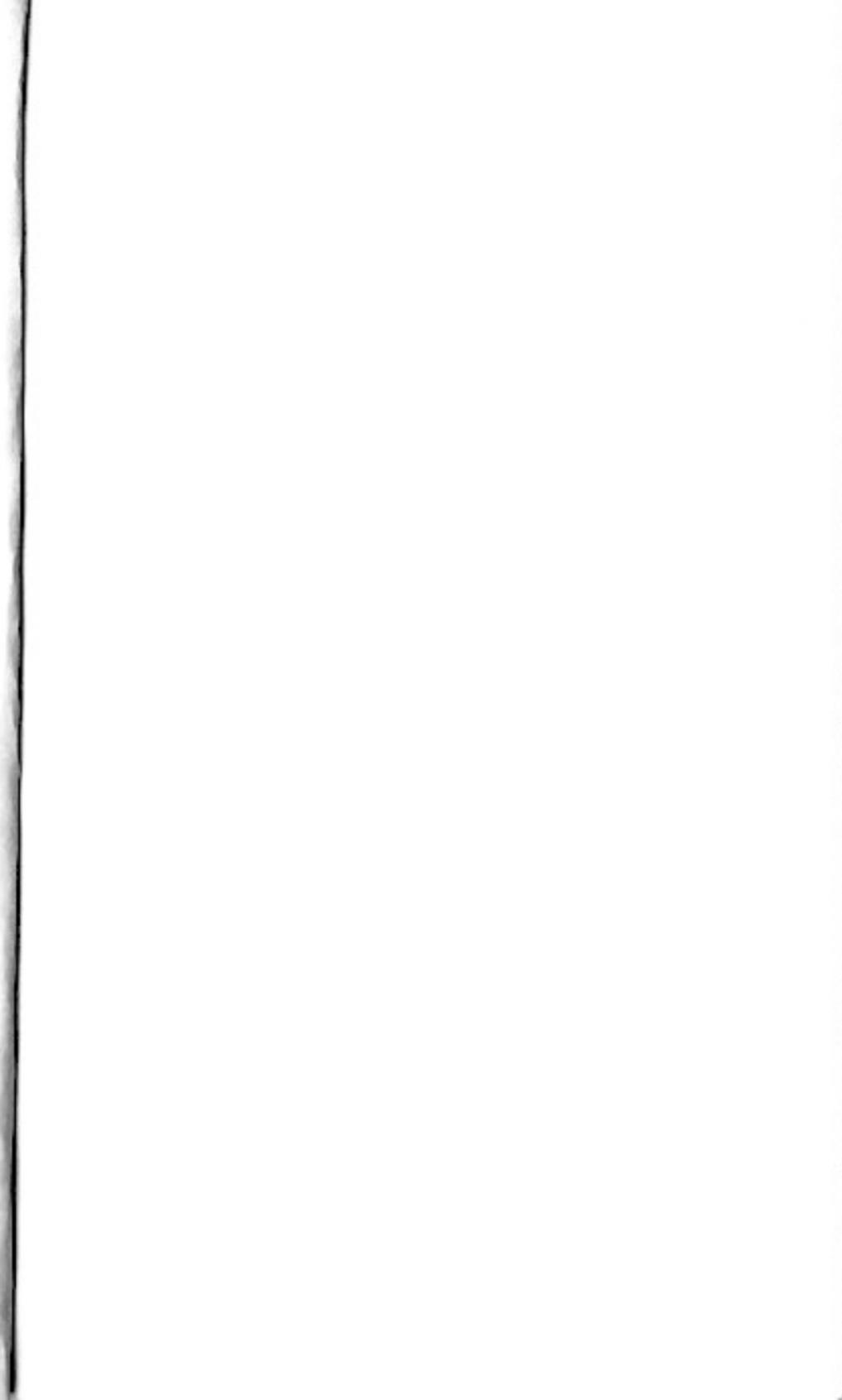


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# SHAFT'S BIG SCORE! Ernest Tidyman



SHAFT'S BIG SCORE!  
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# SHAFT'S BIG SCORE!

# 1

Shaft was bored, sleepy. Some people felt like eagles at thirty-nine thousand feet, rushing across a curly blanket of cloud cover. They felt free, excited. He only suffered a pain in the ass from sitting three and a half hours in the same place. The few vacations he had taken from the agency on the third floor of the seedy Times Square building had also ended this way—with boredom and impatience.

Why the hell had he gone to Jamaica, anyhow? The pussy was neither better nor more plentiful. He sure as hell didn't need a suntan and, in fact, his black-brown coffee-bean skin was more sensitive than that of most whites to the burning Caribbean glare. Vacations are middle-class bullshit, he thought. The only things that made him tired were drinking, smok-

### *Shaft's Big Score*

ing and screwing—and he never let work interfere with them.

"Got another back there?" he asked the pudgy stewardess, holding up the plastic glass at her. She smiled the pudgy plastic smile. Did the pilots have to wind them up before each trip? Could she hold that smile as an engine fell off?

"Here you are, sir. Scotch on the rocks." The voice had all the sincerity of a radio commercial for hemorrhoid ointment and the girl would probably smile all the way through a blow job.

"Thanks," John Shaft said. He could feel the big plane ease into its descent toward the murk that lay over New York like a no man's land between heaven and earth. The chick had sharp, pointy teeth, too.

"Oh, shit!" he said as the January wind cut him in half. Now he knew why he'd gone away to the Caribbean. It was the wind from Long Island Sound that comes off the iron-gray surface of the Atlantic, howls through Rockaway Inlet, picks up muscle rolling across the salt marshes of Big Egg and Jo Cos, Duck Creek and Rulers Bar Hassock, and then slams against the scattered crackerjack-prize architecture of John F. Kennedy International Airport. Shaft's six-foot frame, carrying just a trace of vacation lard, took the wind like the thrust of a six-inch knife. The muscles of his arms and legs jumped and jittered under a wardrobe of light wool and goosebumps.

Somewhere in the chaos of his luggage was a heavy suit and a trenchcoat. He had not been willing to suffer them in Jamaica. Now he could suffer in the cold. He thought of ducking back into the terminal and changing in the men's room. Then a cab peeled out of

the formation and tried to run over his toes. The driver was black—and amused.

"You goin' to the Mardi Gras, brother?"

Shaft closed the door with numb fingers and then huddled back against the seat, blowing on his hands.

"Hudson and Jane Streets," he chattered through staccato teeth.

The driver flashed a smile in a face that looked like a worn-out boot, a hundred lines shattering its surface. He also flicked the heater to high and pulled out.

New York in January. Shaft stared glumly through the smudged window as the cab headed onto the Van Wyck expressway. Queens lay under a patina of black frost, but his mind had crawled back under a warmer blanket. He thought of the green sea piling up on the coast between Falmouth and Saint Ann's Bay, the white clouds drifting through the lush passes of the Blue Mountains, the smell of ginger and frangipani, a moon-washed veranda overlooking Spanish Town, flesh washed by the sea and dried by the sun. He yawned and about halfway through it, his ears popping with the stretch of his jaw, he figured it out: it was a goddamn middle-class bore to go on a vacation.

He had a flash of himself driving up and down the highway in a Ford station wagon with three kids in back and a rowboat on the trailer hitch. He groaned.

Cal Asby stood in the darkness of his office and listened to the hum of traffic on Myrtle Avenue. The sound was gentle, like the ripple of a stream falling over smooth rocks. It was lulling, peaceful. It almost dissolved the knife-twist of fear in his throat. But not quite. He strained to hear the creak of a shoe down

### *Shaft's Big Score*

the hall, the soft hiss of breathing. Nothing. Only his own sounds of fear.

"Cut out that shit," he told himself. And the sound of his voice was a comfort. He flicked on a desk lamp and turned to face the door, almost in defiance. Come on, motherfucker. He was six-two at one hundred and ninety-five pounds and ready. And afraid. Calvin Monroe Asby, businessman, civic leader, a credit to the black community. Calvin Monroe Asby wearing a two-hundred-and-fifty-dollar gray mohair suit, a twenty-dollar Cardin shirt and a twenty-dollar tie, standing in the warm elegance of his office, his back to a walnut desk. What the hell, nobody was coming in the door. Wouldn't dare. Not here. Not now. He had been telling himself that for the last five days. They wouldn't come here—and he'd stayed closer to the ground than a running cat.

He reached for the telephone, half-sitting on the edge of the desk while he dialed. There was no answer, only a harsh, persistent buzzing on the other end of the line. He slammed down the receiver. Even his plumber would have answered the phone at night. But all he could get from John Shaft was a goddamned answering service. He could just go off and not give a shit about anybody. Cal waited until his anger and frustration ebbed, then he strode across the room to the green-and-gold Mosler safe, decorated in flourishes of old English script across the door with the corporate legend of the Asby-Kelly Insurance Company. He knelt in front of it and twirled the combination with the accustomed ease of a man who had opened the safe countless times. There was nothing in it but a small stack of ledger books and a square parcel wrapped in brown paper and tied with string. He removed the parcel and closed the heavy door. A man can hedge

his bets and still be a man. Nobody was going to come after him here. But he'd take some of the odds. That was the smart thing to do. It was not an unpleasant sensation for Asby, this awareness of danger. It made the heart beat faster and pumped adrenalin into his gut. And, suddenly, he was totally free of fear. With luck—and a little expert help—he'd beat them at their own game.

Asby walked out of his office and down the short hall to the darkened reception area. Light from the street filtered through drawn venetian blinds and the beams of passing cars drifted across the walls. The same shadows had filled him with a numb panic when he had first entered the building. He had been reading danger into everything that moved. But he had reached the limit of his fear and now he was shedding it, slipping out of it the way a snake sheds its skin. He crossed the room to the wide front door and stepped resolutely into the icy blast of the avenue.

Next door to the modest brick structure that housed the Asby-Kelly Insurance Company rose the imposing Gothic façade of the Asby-Kelly Funeral Home, its Victorian elegance marred by a red neon sign on the slate roof that flashed a welcome to the dead and to the occasionally living in this tired, shabby area of Queens. Cal had planned to remove that sign after his father died and he inherited the business. Some of the old man's friends talked him out of it. They looked upon its flaming garishness as a landmark—and a comfort. Folks knew they had a place to go. The sign remained, a burst of crimson against the night sky. Cal did not look up at it as he mounted the broad concrete steps that led, through an ornamental arch of wrought iron, to a carved oak door.

"Evenin', Mr. Asby."

Donald Forest stood in the vestibule holding a galvanized metal bucket in one hand and a mop in the other. At sixty-five, Donald Forest was as much a fixture at the funeral home as the sign on the roof. Cal Asby wasn't surprised to see him. Forest had been shuffling through the building every night for as long as Asby could remember.

"Anythin' wrong, Mr. Asby?" Forest looked concerned.

Asby shook his head quickly, annoyed that his fear was showing. He was acutely conscious of the parcel under his arm, but it was pointless to try to conceal it.

"It's . . . it's cold in here, Donald."

Forest grinned, his teeth startlingly white in the shiny blackness of his face. "Ain't heard no complaints from the folks back there. But I'll see to it, Mr. Asby. I'll go on down the cellar and stoke her up a little."

"Yeah," Asby said. "You better bring it up a couple degrees."

He waited in the vestibule until Forest had gone, moving off along one of the dark halls that radiated from the vestibule like the spokes of a wheel. He heard the door to the cellar open and then the sounds of Forest descending the wooden stairs.

Asby was angry with himself. He was doing everything wrong. He should have come around the back, through the delivery entrance and the storeroom. Jesus, he had been lucky it had only been the old man. They could have been waiting for him in the vestibule, standing in the shadows of a hallway. He shook the thought away; it was pointless. They hadn't been waiting and that was all that mattered. He was still running in the lead, still ahead, and he moved swiftly

down a short corridor, pushed open a sliding mahogany door and entered the casket room.

The room was deeply carpeted and a pale, amber light set into the ceiling bathed the wood-paneled walls with a soft, gloomy glow. During the day, organ music was piped into the place and gave it an atmosphere of sanctity. But the fact was, of course, that the room was a salesroom to buy a box for the late lamented. Nothing more, although the crowning jewel of the collection rested on a dais in the center of the room, sitting like a fat monarch waiting for peasants to file by.

It was a coffin for a king, a huge bronze box in the style of a Greek sarcophagus. The cover was propped open like the lid on a grand piano to reveal an interior of quilted pink satin and a silk-covered pillow with the word SOUL embroidered across the face of it. It was a coffin of such exquisite luxury that a man might die of longing just to be packed away amid its feathery ruffles. But nobody could afford it. That's why it had been sitting there since his father's earliest days in business. There was a secret about it that only he and the old man had shared.

Asby bent over the casket and raised the mattress. The flooring was as luxurious as the rest of the casket, a parquetry of cherry and rosewood. He pressed the corner of one artful design and the panel flipped up to reveal a narrow, dark space under the flooring. The opening was too small for the parcel to fit into. Asby slit the side of it with a fingernail and the contents spilled out as groceries tumble from a rain-soaked sack. When the parcel was empty, Asby pushed the panel back into place and replaced the mattress and pillow. Then he stepped back off the platform, wadded the torn paper into a tight ball and

*Shaft's Big Score*

shoved it into his pocket. He felt strangely light-hearted. He could even smile, the first time in a long while. The great bronze casket gleamed under the amber light. What a hell of a price to pay for dying, if you went for that one. But a bargain at the moment: Asby had hidden five hundred thousand dollars beneath its rococo clusters of cherubim and larking angels.

## 2

Shaft's phone was ringing.

"Oh, shut the fuck up," he grumbled, twisting keys into all the locks forced on him by the New York Society for the Betterment of Burglary, one of the most active groups in the city these days. Man couldn't even get his coat off before they were on him. He finally opened the last lock, got in to his apartment, threw down the valise and stared at the telephone. That was the enemy. Any afterglow of the Caribbean was gone now. He was home and the god-damn phone was ringing.

He sat on the edge of the couch and looked at what he had come back to. The apartment mocked him with disorder and shabbiness. There was a small, messy party the night he left. The people were gone,

### *Shaft's Big Score*

but the party was still there. Goddamn cockroaches might have had the decency to come in and clean up the potato chips all over the floor instead of fucking off in the kitchen as usual.

He thought about Rollie Nickerson's theory that the only way to get rid of roaches in an old New York building like this relic in the West Village was to have a big eight-slice electric toaster.

"They go in the bottom after the crumbs," said Nickerson, a tall, thin actor who only worked when Lincoln was in style. "You push the plunger and—zap!—you've electrocuted a whole family. Of course, you also waste a lot of toast."

"I hate toast," Shaft had said.

"Immaterial, old fellow."

The phone rang again. Next to it was a bowl of cheese dip brought by the fat girl who lived upstairs in the building. It was covered with green mold. Probably enough penicillin there to cure half the clap on MacDougal Street up the block.

But it wouldn't cure the phone. He finally picked it up.

"Go to bed," he said.

The voice on the wire was tense.

"... hello? Hello ...?"

"Hello yourself," Shaft said. "Who is it?"

There was a slight hesitation. Then: "Is that you, John?"

"I know who I am, Jim," Shaft said. "And I ain't playing twenty questions at midnight. . . ."

"Cal . . . Cal Asby."

"No shit!" Shaft was suddenly pleased—and very surprised. Calvin Monroe Asby, who came back from Nam about the same time Shaft did, met him taking a crack at CCNY, briefly following the same dreams

—and chased after the same girl. The dreams of money and success had come true for Cal. Hell, the lucky bastard inherited a gold mine from his old man. Funeral homes never run out of customers. And he caught the girl, too.

The way things had gone for Cal and Arna—lean, dark, sensual Arna—well, that made Shaft happy. Goddamnit, everybody ought to know somebody—anybody—who was happy.

And he knew them.

"Hey, baby," he said. "How you doin'?"

"Man, I been trying to reach you for days."

"I went to Jamaica. How are you? How's Arna?"

Asby ignored the small talk.

"I had to try you just one more time. I need help, John. I need it bad."

Oh, crap, Shaft thought. Here it comes. Some fox has the hooks in Cal or some dude is staking out Arna—and now it's time for the domestic blues. He liked Cal and he liked Arna, but he didn't want to hear one goddamn thing that Cal had to say.

"Look, Cal . . ."

"Listen to me, John," Asby snapped. "I don't know if this line is bugged so I'm going to make it short. I need help and I need it now. I mailed you a check for five thousand dollars so consider yourself hired."

Shaft stirred uncomfortably. "Man, I don't want your money. Anyway, you're overpaying. For three grand, you get two captains and an assistant D.A. now."

"You're hired, John." Asby's tone was crisp, final. "I want to see you now . . . tonight. In my office."

"Are you kidding?" Shaft's voice was filled with pain. Cal's office was in Queens, way out in the middle of nowhere. Way out in the cold, cold snow. He

### Shaft's Big Score

lowered his voice and tried to sound patient, understanding, warm and friendly, but positive in his refusal.

"Let's talk about it tomorrow, Cal. Let's get together, have a couple of drinks and just talk it—"

"I'm not getting through to you, John. You're jerking me off. Now listen. I wouldn't call you in the middle of the goddamn night if I was trying to jive you. There are some people who are trying to turn me inside out. It's some heavy shit—and I . . . need . . . help!"

Shaft nodded his head in resignation at the inevitable. "Okay. I'll be out there in an hour."

"Try and make it less."

The phone clicked in Shaft's ear. No good-byes. No thank yous. Just the hard click of the receiver going back into its cradle—in *Queens*. As far as he was concerned, it might just as well have been Piss Pot, Pennsylvania. *Queens!*

Shaft stood up with a groan and took his bag into the bedroom. The bed was a mess of crumpled sheets and a wadded blanket. He dropped his bag on the floor and drew the blanket up and across the bed. A pair of white bikini panties fell out onto the floor, fluttering down like a dying moth. He tried to recall who they belonged to—and couldn't. Maybe she'd come back to get them—if she remembered better than he did—and he'd con her into sweeping up, too. He stripped off the light suit, got slacks and a heavy turtleneck out of the closet. There was a dress hanging there. Not much of a dress, but a dress. How'd that broad get home, he wondered as he slipped the small, flat Colt .380 automatic into the pocket of his jacket. She wasn't wearing a bra. Nobody wore a

bra. Panties, dress and no bra. What a surprise she was under her coat. If she had a coat.

The cabdriver wasn't overjoyed. He didn't like the looks of the tall black man in the black leather coat and the black fur cap. The mother looked like a Panther gunman or a Muslim war lord. He looked like a mean sonofabitch standing under the lamppost at the corner of Hudson and Jane Streets. He hoped the bastard wasn't going up to Harlem.

"Where to, bud?"

He got into the back seat and closed the door before the driver could ask any more questions.

"I like to know where I'm going." The driver glanced sullenly over his shoulder. His thin features were pinched with cold. He was in the wars, too. He didn't like big, black men who just wanted him to drive around. Shaft couldn't blame him.

"Fifty-ninth Street . . . then to the bridge."

"To it or over it?" The driver's voice was an irritation to the ears. It was like peppermint candy crunching on false teeth—rasping and hollow.

"Over it," Shaft said. "And turn left, Queens."

The driver stopped, just as Shaft knew he would. He was ready for him. He had his wallet out.

"Fuck it," the man said. "I'm not drivin' out to no Queens this time of night."

Shaft waved a ten-dollar bill at the plastic wall between them. "Drive. And you can wait for me. Ten going and ten coming back. This is your lucky night."

The driver was tempted, but suspicion lingered in his pale, watery eyes.

Shaft put the bill in the metal chute in the plastic shield. "Look, Jack, just drive it. I haven't mugged

### *Shaft's Big Score*

a hackie for maybe a week—ten days. I'm smuggling slaves to the plantations over the river."

The driver hated himself for not kicking Shaft into the middle of Hudson Street, but twenty dollars was twenty dollars and Shaft was too big to kick, anyhow. He plucked the ten out of the cup and stuffed it into the pocket of his mackinaw.

"Where do you wanna go?"

"I don't know the address," Shaft said. "It's out on Myrtle, just past that big cemetery. You can't miss it. The Asby-Kelly Funeral Home."

The driver shuddered as he turned back to clutch the wheel. The dinge could be playing with him. He could get a bullet in the head. He hit the accelerator and they moved off.

Silly pain in the ass, Shaft thought.

Maybe we'll get stopped for speeding, the cabbie hoped. He stole a fast glance in the mirror. The big menace in the back seat was out like a light. Snoring. The sonofabitch made more noise than the rattling of the cab's worn shock absorbers.

"Here we are, Jack."

Shaft stirred reluctantly as the grating voice cut into his dream. He was walking through Times Square and he kept encountering the same girl who yanked open her raincoat and exposed herself to him. Each time she did, Shaft hooked the elastic of a pair of white panties on one thumb and fired them at her.

"Jack . . . for chrissakes . . . wake up. We're here."

Shaft sat up, blinking at the miserable reality of the taxi. Under the raincoat, he remembered who she was. The cold had seeped through his leather coat and had settled in his bones. Streamers of mist drifted

across the road and obscured the buildings on the other side. Only the vivid pink glow of the Asby sign gave any clue to where they were.

"Thanks," Shaft said, not meaning it.

The driver looked at his watch. "How long you think you'll be?"

"Five minutes, if I get a choice."

He got out of the cab stiffly but awake and alert and stood on the icy pavement. The broad, old street was deserted except for a lone car moving slowly past the funeral home with its parking lights on. There were three men in the car, two in front and one hunched forward on the back seat. He couldn't tell if they were white or black and it didn't matter. The car passed the Asby-Kelly Insurance building and picked up speed, gunning off into the mist. Shaft stepped away from the cab. Then he felt it. A stiff breeze came up off the Asby-Kelly building. Then the light. Then the sound. Dawn was coming up like thunder out of hell across the street. But it was only 1:00 A.M.

He had a sense, or maybe he actually saw it before the explosion threw him away like a crumpled Kleenex, of the landscape dissolving, of bricks and boards soaring to the sky on paths of flame. Maybe he just thought he saw it, for Shaft's arms went up around his head as he reeled against a storefront and curled into a protective ball, bouncing under the concussion.

He thought, with just a flicker of his shuddering reason, about Cal. Was Asby tense and worried, or relaxed because help was on the way? Or, like most of us, was he too busy dying to be anything at all as the inferno engulfed even the slightest of his sorrows?

"You're not being much help, Mr. Shaft."

Shaft dropped his cigarette into the river of slush and soot that was freezing at his feet. He felt like he'd been through a ten-day love affair with a girl who practiced karate chops on Volkswagen fenders. His eyes were bloodshot from dust, smoke and lack of sleep. His ears ached and his head throbbed and what was left of Calvin Monroe Asby's friendship was going by on a morgue stretcher.

"I can't tell you what I don't know."

Pete Bollin nodded his acceptance of that. Any homicide detective knows when an interrogation is over. This one was. Maybe John Shaft knew more than he was telling, maybe he didn't. Bollin knew he wasn't going to get it out of him under direct questioning.

"That five thousand dollars you mentioned," Bollin asked casually, "what did you do with it?"

"I already told you. I don't know if he even sent it."

Shaft was doing his best to keep cool. He didn't like being grilled, even mildly, but he was in no shape to be hassled. This bastard was taking it easy, feeling his way. But he was still a pain in the ass. Detective Sergeant Pete Bollin. Shaft had heard of him and nothing he had heard had been pleasant. A heavy-shouldered, barrel-chested, bullet-headed black man, Pete Bollin had been with the Harlem detective division, then with Bedford-Stuyvesant. All the ghetto posts. Any black cat who thought he'd have an easier time of it because a brother wore the badge —well, that was the wrong thing to think about Bollin. Pete Bollin was tougher on blacks than a red-neck deputy. Try to put him down on the basis of race,

he'd put you down on the basis of a handful of pistol upside the head.

"When you have the time to get your mail, and if there's an envelope there from Calvin Asby, I want you to bring that envelope in to me . . . unopened. You got that? *Un-opened.*"

"I've got it," Shaft snapped. "I'm not stupid."

There was no expression on Bollin's face.

"I hope you're not, Shaft. I hope you've been on the level with me."

The fire hoses were piddling out the last sparks. Shaft knew his clothes, even his body, would stink of the fire through four or five scrubblings. It'd take a week to get it out of his nose. And this Bollin, this sonofabitch, was really too much. Shaft wanted to move.

"If that's all the questions, I'd like to go."

"Back to the big city?" A sneer without a change of expression. Very good. The asshole should be an actor after the collapse of his arches.

"Maybe."

"I thought you might want to pay your respects to the widow."

"That's my business."

"Sure it is," Bollin said pleasantly. "You know where to find her, I imagine?"

"I told you—we're old friends. Cal and Arna and me." His words came out thin and tight. He was struggling for control. The urge to belt this clown into the tangle of police and fire apparatus was near that edge of irresistible temptation where it became an obligation.

"You can go now," Bollin said mechanically. "Thanks for your cooperation."

"It was my pleasure. Always happy to help the

### Shaft's Big Score

police department." And up your left nostril with a Popsicle stick.

Bollin didn't bother to watch him leave. He continued to watch the highly organized chaos of police and firemen working in response to what was obviously a murder. He watched the guys from the bomb squad picking up fragments of shredded material for their little containers.

"Well?" Captain Samson stood next to him with a mug of fire-truck coffee in one hand and a flashlight in the other.

"Well what?"

"The witness!" Samson said irritably.

"That wasn't no witness, boss. That was a jive-ass nigger private eye who needs to be screwed into the ground."

Samson liked Bollin, the best cop, black or white, that he had. But there were times when he was offended. The captain tried so hard to get contemporary about the race thing and Bollin came along calling other blacks niggers. Wasn't there enough god-damn trouble....

"Maybe he triggered the blast," Bollin said. "Or fingered it. He claims Asby hired him, but he doesn't know what he was hired to do. He claims Asby sent him a five-thousand-dollar retainer, but he hasn't seen the check yet on account he just got back from *Jamaica*, for Christ's sake. Every pothead faggot in New York goes to *Jamaica* and comes back with two kilos and a British lisp."

"What does that prove?"

"Nothing. I'm going to run over to Manhattan East and check him out. If he's a reputable, like he claims to be, I should come up with some background. But Asby wasn't playing marbles. This faker isn't either."

Samson took a sip from the mug and nodded.  
"The lab boys found the detonator," he said. "Radio-controlled. Simple little gadget. Buy it in a hobby shop, the kind of thing they put in model planes. The explosive was simple, too—dynamite. A lot of it. They weren't taking any chances on missing."

"That kind never does."

"Meaning?"

"Just what you think it means. Asby wasn't nailed by a disgruntled customer. They can talk to him now. He was hit by pros. It was the first shot in a war."

Samson nodded again. There was a lot to be said for letting the bastards kill each other. But he couldn't say it. Bollin said it for him.

"So I think we sit on our asses and wait. Things are happening we don't know about. Let them make the next move."

"I wish I knew who the hell *them* were."

"You will," Bollin promised, "any minute now."

### 3

As a young man, Arthur Sharrett attributed his rise in the world to his physical strength. He had projected a raw, male force, evoking primal fear in men and primitive desire in women. He used both to advantage in the liquor-importing and distributing business during the chaotic days after repeal. Arthur Sharrett bulled his way to the top. He was arrogant and despicable in his success. But he was consistent. He would have been arrogant and despicable in failure.

Sharrett got his when he was forty. Hundreds smiled to a punitive divinity as a catastrophic muscular disease sliced him down, beginning with the minor pains of sciatica and then twisting, atrophying, each limb it touched. In an agonized frenzy, he be-  
20

came an arrogant and despicable cripple, the fine body an impotent shell. Heavy steel braces and leather straps supported his ravaged legs, but even with the use of canes he could take no more than a few painful steps. He was doomed to a wheelchair and there were many who felt it was almost appropriate.

But to Arthur Sharrett it had not been an ending, only a beginning. Power, he soon realized, was not in the body but in the mind. And power is the true ecstasy, the orgasm of the mind—one he could seek each day from his penthouse apartment overlooking Central Park—without reaching satiation. It was enough to make him smile in the mirrors as he wheeled down the long carpeted hallway to his study.

Gus Mascola cursed the morning traffic that turned Columbus Circle into a turgid river of cars. It was the goddamn cabs, he knew. Get rid of the goddamn cabs and there would be no traffic problem. But there would also be no fleet of Mascola's own yellow-splotched Fords. And Mascola had killed a fat Yid named Fat Yid Frankfurter to get them. Still, he cursed—the cabs, his driver, the weather and his old pal Arthur Sharrett.

"The sonofabitch," he muttered.

Tony Foglio half-turned his head, presenting a hawk's profile.

"You say something, boss?"

"Shut up and drive!"

Tony Foglio grinned and took both hands off the wheel. The Mercedes limousine was wedged between a bus and a taxi. It wasn't going anywhere.

"Drive, the man said."

It was a mistake for Foglio to have opened his mouth. Gus Mascola leaned slightly forward and hissed

a few words in Sicilian. Tony Foglio, who was twenty years younger and sixty pounds heavier than Gus Mascola, went the color of dirty snow and looked quickly away from the furious eyes boring into his own. He stared at the back of the bus and gripped the steering wheel with taut hands.

Punks, Mascola thought as he leaned back against the pigskin seat. They came from nowhere and they went nowhere. They thought of nothing but fancy suits and fancy tail. They wore their pants too tight and their hair too long. They were punks. They were nothing. A few were different. Joe Rip . . . Andy Pascal . . . Jerry Longo . . . a few good ones left. The rest were punks. But what the hell could he do? Send this clown back to sneezing flour in a pizzeria until he learned to watch his mouth.

The traffic moved suddenly as though an unseen hand had pulled the plug, and Tony Foglio threaded the big car through the traffic stream and pulled up in front of an apartment building on Central Park South.

"Wait around the corner on Sixth."

Mascola had his habits, his methods of staying alive. He never came out the same door he entered. If a building didn't have a rear exit he wouldn't go into it. It was illogical and he knew it. If anybody wanted to get him they would get him whether he came out the back door, the front door, or a window. His habit made about as much sense as the Christopher medal in his car.

He entered the building quickly, stepping adroitly over the piles of ice that had been scraped off the sidewalk. Mascola hated winter because of the slush. Winter was an affront to his wardrobe. As he rode the elevator toward the penthouse he took a hand-

kerchief out of his coat pocket and wiped the tips of his black shoes, of a hide softer than some broads he knew. On the penthouse landing he studied his image in a gold-framed mirror, fussing over the bulging knot in his tie. He always liked to look his best when calling on Arthur Sharrett.

Gail Sharrett opened the door for him as he knew she would. Sharrett kept no servants except an ancient cook. His daughter was secretary, butler, chauffeur and nurse. In Mascola's eyes, she was also tiger meat, a prize of the jungle. She was taller than he was, an icy, green-eyed, twenty-three-year-old blonde, small breasts, narrow hips. She wasn't the type his lumpy, hairy fingers usually found in the dark corners where his basic passions skulked and sweated. But Gail Sharrett turned him on with coldness, her frigid aloofness. His fantasy was to fuck her—not make love or romance—fuck her in the most brutal postures possible while a few select associates watched. They would emerge, like the guests at a birthday party, crying, "Surprisel Surprisel" just as he. . . .

"Good morning, Gail," he said pleasantly.

"I'll tell father who's here," she said.

She despised him and was deliberate in making certain that he knew it. He didn't mind. "Surprisel Surprisel" And then he would. . . .

She closed the door and moved quickly down the hall with tight-ass stiffness, aware of Mascola's eyes, if not all his fantasies. She opened a sliding door and went into the oak-paneled study where her father sat in his wheelchair in front of the fireplace, tasting the warmth of the flames, bent toward the heat, his legs covered with a fur lap robe. His eyes, sunk into his head with pain, showed a flicker of amusement at the sight of his daughter's anger.

*Shaft's Big Score*

"I gather Mr. Mascola is here."

"Yes," she said, "the friendly neighborhood sex degenerate."

"And what do you think he wants?"

"My body . . . the gold fillings in your teeth and the silverware."

"But what's his mood?"

She crossed to a table and took a cigarette from an ebony-and-silver box, lighted it with a silver glob from Tiffany's and blew a savage jet trail of smoke through her delicate-looking nostrils.

"He only has two moods—ugly and unctuous. This is one of his uglies. Of course, he's always quite pleasant while he undresses me. But I'd say he has an ugly day on. Watch yourself."

"Don't be ridiculous," Sharrett said quietly. He pushed one wheel of the chair and turned to face the door. "Show him in."

The room bugged Mascola. Too dull, stuffy. A man with Sharrett's money could have had a room that made the eyes bulge. This was nothing but a room of dull wood walls and old furniture out of a movie set for those fairies dancing around with swords and ruffled shirts. His own office was a knockout. A stunner. Sharrett had once told him that the paintings in the room were priceless, part of a collection. But they sure as hell didn't *look* it. A nothing room. He sat down in a chair and crossed his legs.

"You're lookin' good, Arthur."

Sharrett's lips drew back, revealing large, yellowish teeth. It was as close as he ever came to a smile.

"You didn't come here to comment on my health."

Mascola pursed his thick lips and studied his fingernails. "I hear lots of talk, Arthur. I hear a shuffle's

goin' on. And I hear you're bringing Knocks Persons in."

Sharrett's smile was fixed. "I was saving that announcement for the meeting tomorrow."

"I couldn't wait. The excitement was killing me." "Persons is an important man."

"He's a fat-assed dinge—and you know it."

Sharrett sighed deeply and turned his wheelchair toward the fire. "You're letting your personal feelings run away with you, Gus. Persons means power. He means muscle."

A vein popped out on Mascola's forehead, a thick blue cord quivering like a live wire. "Muscle? What the hell do you think I have? Everything in Brooklyn from Red Hook to Brownsville, from Coney Island to Greenpoint, is there because I brought it in. The numbers, the broads, the books—all of it! I ain't taking any orders from some dumb nigger who's got two crap games goin' on the streets of Harlem!"

"Did you come here to have a tantrum, Gus?" Sharrett's voice was a chill whisper.

"I want to know what the hell's going on," Mascola muttered.

"We've worked together a long time, Gus. I wish you would think beyond your own immediate ego involvement. . . . To begin with, I don't want Knocks Persons sitting at my elbow any more than you do. But we must have a piece of what he's got. Do you know what that is, Gus?"

"You tell me."

Sharrett seemed oblivious of Mascola's irritation. He gazed serenely into the fire and seemed to find peace and contentment in the flames.

"Persons has the biggest bankroll in the country. Every other dollar that moves through Harlem finds

its way into his pocket. Everyone knows that, of course. But what most people don't realize is that Persons has a dark hand on the Bronx, and—whether you like it or not—or even know it or not—most of black Brooklyn as well."

He paused for effect. "Now, Gus, our black Napoleon has shown an interest in moving into Queens."

Mascola jumped up like an angry bear.

"I'm bringing Queens into the pot and you damn well know it!"

Sharrett turned his head and looked at the enraged man standing above him. The light from the fire was reflected in his cold eyes.

"Where is it, Gus? This is a crap shoot. You have to put money on the table or you don't handle the dice. Knock's willing to do that with three . . . four hundred thousand just to show good faith. That's a lot of cash. When he brings it in what am I supposed to tell him? That he's the new janitor?"

"I don't care shit what you tell the sonofabitch. I got Queens and he can just stay the fuck out!"

"Money talks, Gus. You can put it up to the others at the meeting, but that's always been the way. Cash buys territories. Sanchez in Miami . . . three hundred and fifty thousand . . . Jake in Dallas . . . two hundred thousand . . . that's the way we do it, Gus. You know that. If Queens is yours, put it on the table."

"I'll bring it in."

"Good. Show me. High roll takes the game."

Mascola spun on his heels and walked out of the room. Sharrett listened for the slamming of the front door. Then he brought his left hand out from under the lap robe, clutched tightly on the .44 caliber over-and-under derringer that, at close range, of course, could have punched two holes in Mascola's anger

*Shaft's Big Score*

about the size of a grapefruit. He dropped it into a desk drawer, silently against the green baize lining.

"What did you tell him?" Gail stood in the doorway looking pleased.

"The facts of life."

"He must have been shocked. He didn't even pause for his farewell feelie."

"Yes. His pride was hurt." Sharrett wheeled the chair over to the window and looked down at the leafless etching of the tree limbs in the park. "Do you remember when we were in Aruba and watched them dumping food scraps for the sharks?"

"I remember."

"A curious phenomenon, Gail, and an interesting point. Even though there was plenty of food, the sharks insisted on eating each other."

"Gus Mascola's a shark."

"Certainly," Arthur Sharrett said. He began to laugh, a soft little chortle that would have caused heart pains in an alligator.

## 4

A man dies. Or he is made to die. He fades from the earth and leaves only memories. Shaft felt out of place in Calvin Monroe Asby's big house. He stood in one corner of the living room and looked out on a garden mantled in snow. The room was full of mourners—sad and silent women and stone-faced men, relatives and friends. Shaft did not know any of them and he could not share their feelings of personal loss. Cal had been a buddy a long time ago and now he was dead. He could feel no grief, only rage. It was the only emotion he had for death, a sense of outrage that it should come to interrupt the pursuit of living.

"He was such a fine boy." An elderly woman

wept her words into a handkerchief. "Such a sweet child."

Another woman nodded. "I remember . . . I surely remember . . ."

What the hell difference did it make what they remembered, he wondered, looking around at them. They couldn't remember how good it felt to Cal Asby to pour his soul down the warm womb-well of a woman, or sense the surging triumph of the days when he was sinning, or raise the drink, or taste the food, or make the land around him tremble with his wrath. They could remember *about* him, but not a single thing he surely felt and knew. But Shaft could. Because he had felt it all, too. And that made him mad.

"John . . . John Shaft."

Arna Asby stood at the top of the stairs looking down at him. She was dry-eyed, but she wore the cloak of grief. Shock and horror were still marked on her pretty, oval face and her lips trembled as though she were struggling to contain a scream.

"Hello, Arna," Shaft said. He felt a sharp pang at seeing her. Even after so many years, he still experienced a sense of loss when in her presence. Almost, almost, but she had chosen Cal. She had picked security and he had never blamed her for it. He waited by the door as she came down the stairs and into his arms. She pressed her face against his chest and he could feel her body trembling.

"Why, John? Why did it happen?"

He had no answer. Nobody could make it unhappen even if they figured it out. He gently stroked her back and the curl of hair at the base of her neck.

"It'll be all right, baby," he lied. Easiest thing in the world, lying to a grieving woman. The only

### *Shaft's Big Score*

thing easier was robbing her with a high-price funeral while she cried.

She drew back and looked up at him.

"They say, the police say, you were there."

"Cal called me."

"He was in trouble. I know that, John . . . but . . . I don't know what it was. He wouldn't talk about . . ."

"He never told me, either."

There was doubt in her eyes. "But he sent for you. He must have said something."

"He never had the chance."

The doubt lingered, but she wasn't able to ask any more questions. Her appearance in the hall had created a movement from the living room of friends and neighbors pressing forward, murmuring their words of sympathy and condolence.

It seemed like the proper time to leave and Shaft turned back to the door. A tall, stocky man stood in front of it.

"Could I have a word with you, Mr. Shaft?"

The man looked vaguely familiar and Shaft tried to place him. He had the kind of face that was easy to forget, round and seemingly boneless, the eyes too small and the lips too full. A weak, sensual face dangling like an ebony moon over a shapeless body.

"Kelly," the man said. "Albert J. Kelly, Calvin's partner. We met a couple of years ago on Cal's boat."

Shaft had a dim recollection of a party on a small power cruiser, but mostly on the City Island dock. A lot of people wearing yellow or orange Bermuda shorts, Kelly among them. He had had two drinks and split.

"Sure," Shaft said. "I remember you."

Kelly held out his hand and Shaft took it. The hand was strong and hard.

"Got the law after you, huh?"

"They asked me some questions."

Kelly looked about as pleasant as his question. Shaft considered the etiquette of punching a mourner in the mouth.

"Asked me some questions, too," Kelly added, sounding like a Boston Irishman. Kelly! Shaft almost laughed.

"That's how it goes," Shaft said. He opened the front door and stepped out onto the porch. Albert J. Kelly went right along with him.

"The funeral will be tomorrow," Kelly said. "Ten o'clock. I'll take care of Arna."

Oh, he would, would he?

Brick steps led down to the quiet, tree-lined street. All of the houses along it were large and well kept, the houses of the black rich. The men who owned such houses were expected to die decently in bed, not shattered by a bomb blast.

"I'll see you tomorrow," Shaft said. "Got room in the car?"

He'd just see who took care of Arna. Kelly didn't like it. His cheek muscles twitched.

"I guess...."

"Good," said Shaft.

He ended the conversation by walking down the porch steps. Shaft didn't say good-bye. He simply strode off. Kelly remained on the porch and watched him until he turned the corner at the end of the block. Shaft bothered him. So did the possibility that Cal had talked to this tough, young stranger before the blast.

The building was roped off and a red Fire Department van squatted in front of it. A police squad car and a panel truck from the crime lab were in the alleyway that separated the building from the funeral home. Kelly drove past quickly, not even looking at it, and turned the black Olds into the parking area behind the funeral home. There was a place alongside the new Cadillac hearse. He wondered idly if there was a funeral scheduled that day. Tomorrow would be Cal's. The thought pained him. Cal had always been a problem as far as the business had been concerned. They had come into conflict over its direction and the manner of its handling, but personally he had liked and admired the man. He would miss him.

"He wants to see you . . . now."

The voice was right in his ear. Kelly jumped. He hadn't seen Tony Foglio step up to the car nor heard him open the door. It was a credit to Foglio's adolescent hobby of sticking up people who stopped for traffic lights.

Foglio got into the back seat quickly, quietly.

"If you're not too busy pissin' in your pants," he advised Kelly, "get going."

Kelly looked quickly over his shoulder.

"Is he out of his mind? Coming here!"

"He ain't here—I am. And nobody seen nothing. Just back on outa here and drive down to Sixty-eighth Street. In front of the drugstore. You know the car."

"He's crazy," Kelly said. But he didn't have a gun to support his psychiatric evaluation. And Foglio certainly did.

Gus Mascola sat alone in the back of the Mercedes. He eyed Kelly stonily as the black man parked in front

of him and walked quickly, almost furtively, to the car and got in beside him, while Foglio went into the drugstore, where he could stand watch among the corn plaster displays.

There was a slight glaze of sweat on Kelly's forehead as he got in next to Mascola and the burly Sicilian knew it without looking. They came that way to him. Sweating.

"You stink, Kelly."

"For Christ's sake, Gus, what are you doing here? There's cops all over Queens. They put us together and . . ."

Mascola looked idly out the side window. A few women were walking by pushing baby strollers through the cold, the infants so heavily bundled only noses and mittens were visible.

"We got things to talk over. I do things for you . . . you do things for me. Right?" Mascola found a cigar in an inside pocket, peeled it, and bit the tip off precisely. He spat the tobacco crumb toward the front seat. What the hell, he could always get a new Mercedes, but a good cigar was hard to find.

"Now?" Kelly said. "Are you out of your mind? The man isn't cold yet and you want to get started. They've got me under a microscope, for Christ's sake. A man's partner gets killed and the cops start looking around to see who got rich. We have to take it easy."

"I want the money, Kelly. I want the money and I want it now."

"But, Gus, it's there—it's like in the bank—and all I need is a little time to—"

"Now," Mascola said flatly. He opened the side window and threw two dollars' worth of Castro's best

### *Shaft's Big Score*

tobacco into the city street. "Not tomorrow or next week. Now."

"What if I'm tailed? What if they catch me coming out of that building with five hundred grand? What then?"

"It's a risk."

"It's a risk we don't have to take!"

Mascola shrugged his heavy shoulders.

"It ain't the biggest risk you're taking today," he said, looking out the window, then turning his dark eyes and their promise of death on Kelly. "You could get killed just walking across a street in this town."

The two sour-faced old Pinkertons guarding the rubble at the bombed-out building were sharing a container of coffee in the reception room, standing ankle-deep in the debris and bitching about the cold guards stand in while detectives went into nice, warm saloons looking for the doers of Sunday evil. The men from the crime lab and the Fire Department's arson squad were gone. All Kelly had to do to get in was prove he was Albert J. Kelly and owned the wreckage—or at least half of it.

"I have to check," he said.

The guards looked at Kelly and Mascola with total disinterest. One of them suggested he should check for his own insurance policy covering the mess.

"Watch out for fallin' plaster," the other mumbled. "Every once in a while it dumps on ya." He had a large wet smudge on his uniform. He had been dumped on.

When Kelly looked, he was shocked. There was only a wide, jagged hole in the floor where Cal's desk had been. The walls and the ceiling were pockmarked from the jagged concrete shrapnel of the

room's foundation. The primary force of the explosion had been downward. It had saved Cal from being blown into unidentifiable fragments, but it had killed him as well.

Kelly forced himself not to think about it. Death had been swift, merciful. Concussion had snuffed out his life the way a gust of wind snaps the flame from a candle.

"What the hell are you starin' at?" Mascola snarled. "Just open the thing."

The bright green paint and the gold lettering had been seared from its steel sides by the blast and it stood half-buried under shattered bricks and mounds of pulverized plaster.

"Maybe we should wait," he said. "Get the safe out of here. . . ."

Mascola looked contemptuous.

"What the hell are you afraid of? You think Asby's ghost is gonna jump out of it and bite you on the ass? You're gettin' on my nerves, Kelly, and I don't like people who get on my nerves."

Kelly moved to the safe and knelt in front of it.

Four to the right to ninety-six. Three to the left to forty-eight. Two to the right to twenty-three. One to the left to eight. And—

Click!

The heavy door groaned on its fire-tightened hinges. Kelly gripped the handle with both hands and forced it open, the big back and shoulder muscles bunching under his coat like bananas. A few account ledgers slid out and fell at his feet. Then words also bunched in his throat like bananas and all he could get out was a strangled gasp.

Mascola shifted his feet impatiently. "Well? Where is it?"

Kelly stared up at him in horror. "Gone . . . the money's gone."

Mascola pushed aside Kelly roughly and squatted down. His blunt fingers tore through the ledger books and file folders, hurling them out as a cat hurls dirt on its leavings. But there was no money.

"You double-crossing sonofabitch." Mascola's voice was a whisper of doom.

"No, Gus." Kelly held up a hand. "Maybe Cal got it out. That's it. He put it someplace. I'll find it."

"Pick up some books and let's get out of here," Mascola said, kicking aside debris as he whirled toward the door.

Kelly scrambled for the books, scooped up two or three and they moved out of the shambles and out past the two guards without a word.

"Messy, ain't it?" one cop said. Kelly nodded. Mascola ignored them.

"I'm goin' back to my office," Mascola said as they hit the sidewalk. "I'll expect your call in an hour. I want you to go to your office just like I'm goin' to mine. I want you to sit behind your desk and think about me. Just think about me, Kelly, and what I'll do to you if you don't get the money. Okay?"

He turned away and walked off. Kelly thought of killing him. Right there on the street, running up behind Mascola and burying his fingers in the heavy flesh of his neck. But he couldn't be sure that somehow, out of some knowledge based on long experience of how such things are done, that Mascola wouldn't kill him first. Right there on the street.

## 5

The sun looked tired, uncertain. It didn't want to be here in New York while the weather was so lousy. It was pale, weak, in need of going South for the winter. The wind was strong, though. It came across the frosted lawns, moaning through endless rows of granite markers like a hundred widows and cut into the huddled crowd, the slash of a whip. The Reverend Andrew Blake stood at the open mouth of the grave, clutching his prayer book with bloodless blue fingers. He was reading rapidly, hurrying the twenty-third psalm like a march cadence but there was no one in the crowd who could fault him. Enough words had been spoken in the church, what with eulogies and prayers. The dead had their due; the living were about to freeze to death.

"... surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Amen."

*Amen!*

The word rose in a murmured echo from fifty throats. Then they turned away in the dark clusters of numbed sorrow.

Arna Asby, slim and beautiful in a dark fur coat, stood rooted by the grave that held the great bronze coffin and a collection of her hopes and habits. Shaft stood at one side of her, Kelly the other. Neither of them knew what to say.

"I can't . . ." she began. "That's not my Cal in there . . ."

Shaft took her arm and turned her away.

"I think we should go, Arna." Shaft's tone was sympathetic but firm. "The minister will see it done."

He glanced to the Reverend Blake, who was trying to blow life back into his own dead fingers, shifting his weight from foot to foot. The minister nodded to him. Take her home, take her to some better place than this for the real beginning of her sorrow.

"It's all right, Arna," Kelly said.

She turned. Some of her weight fell against Shaft. He realized that he was holding her erect, that without the strength of his support she would have fallen to the ground.

"Yes," she whispered. "Good-bye, my darling."

They sat in the back of the limousine with Arna in the center. She sat stiffly, staring straight ahead as the big car moved soundlessly through the park-like grounds of the cemetery and out onto the streets of Queens.

There was nothing Shaft could think of that would be right to say, so he didn't say anything. Kelly

seemed to be having the same problem. They were silent.

But Shaft was thinking. Pete Bollin had been one of the figures on the fringe of the mourners. They always went to funerals, looking for guilt. What bullshit. Guilt was sitting in a warm bar, having two or three drinks and smiling about how well the bomb had worked. If Bollin spent more time in saloons and less in cemeteries, he'd catch more killers. That was the simple logic of it. Even an asshole policeman could understand it.

Arna reached out and took his hand. He squeezed back. Take the strength, there, baby—you need all you can get.

But he didn't say anything and neither did she. And neither did Kelly. Shaft glanced at the other man across Arna's profile. Kelly's eyes were filled with hatred and anger. They were on the clasped hands. He looked up at Shaft and the eyes clouded over, hiding what had been there so nakedly.

The car glided along in silence, until it coasted in for a soft landing against the curb in front of the large two-story house.

Shaft expected some emotional reaction by Arna to this gloomy homecoming. But there was none. She got out of the car slowly, heavily, moving like a middle-aged matron instead of a young woman. That was the weight of her pain.

"Take her in," Shaft told Kelly. He fished in his pocket and came up with a five-dollar bill for the driver, a short, round man with glossy white hair beneath the black chauffeur's cap.

"Thanks, brother," the driver said.

"Yeah." He didn't want to go in. He was being a shit, but Arna was going into the shock of looking

### *Shaft's Big Score*

at all the familiar objects, the rooms filled with moments and memories, and there wasn't a goddamn thing he could do for her. Anybody could do for her—so it might as well be Kelly who stood there and watched it happen. Shaft looked around and sucked the cold air into his lungs. The driver offered him a cigarette and they smoked together and looked around.

"Asby did pretty good," Shaft concluded. "Insurance and funerals. You get 'em coming and going and it's a great combination."

The driver looked up with smirking eyes.

"So's the number for today, brother," he said.

The number? There's only one number in any day of the black man on this street or in the meanest ghetto tenement. That's the policy number—the last three digits of the stock-exchange total transactions or the last three numbers of a race-track handle. It's nigger roulette and it always has been.

"You tryin' to lay something heavy on me, brother?" Shaft asked.

The driver regarded him with all the respect he'd give the rube of the week getting off the Trailways Special from the mud flats of Opelousas.

"Not me, man."

"What's the numbers got to do with Asby?"

The driver backed off, flipped his smoke into the gutter.

"We don't talk about the departed ones in my line, friend, not until—"

Arna's scream hit Shaft's alarm button like a hammer. He had spun around and was leaping up the walk and onto the front-porch steps in a dead run before she stopped for breath, and while the driver was still talking.

The driver thought he'd seen speed before, but he'd never seen anything *that* fast—just under two hundred pounds of meat and meanness flashing toward the house—barely touching those steps and going through the door like it wasn't there.

"Been locked," he said, "that boy'd a cut an outline of his figure in it goin' through."

The driver never noticed that Shaft had a .38 Colt in his hand by the time he did get there. The sight of it stopped Arna's screams. Kelly pulled back at the sight of it.

"What's wrong?" Shaft demanded.

He could see as soon as he asked, sooner than they could answer. The house had been ransacked: pillows torn open, bookcase spilled over, all drawers pulled and dumped. A house turned inside out.

"I thought I saw . . ." Arna gasped.

"Watch her," Shaft told Kelly. He ran to the stairs, got up them two at a time and stepped up to knock open a bedroom door.

Thonk!

The noise came from downstairs, the basement. There was a scramble of feet. He cursed his optimism, his hope of trapping whoever it was looking for jewelry in the bedrooms where most people hide their valuables, where most burglars look first and find them.

Three leaps, four steps at a time, and he was down. He followed the noises toward the kitchen, and burst in on two young white hoodlums about to kick each other to death in the scramble to get out the door.

Shaft grabbed. And got one.

The thin, wiry windmill of arms and legs struck out at him from four directions with fist and foot as the other crashed out the back door. But all he

### *Shaft's Big Score*

needed was one of the bastards. He whipped back the pistol for one steel-reinforced slap that would turn this small tiger into a sleepy pussycat . . . and suddenly he felt his feet being kicked out from under him.

"I got him!" Kelly shouted as their large entangled bodies hit the floor together with a crash that shook the house.

And Shaft's prize fish wriggled off the hook of his hand.

"Let go of me, you sonofabitch!" Shaft shouted, trying to get to his feet. The heavy weight of Kelly's body was all over him like a bag of muscular seaweed. Shaft was outraged. He had one of them! And now all he had was bruises for his effort.

With a violent lurch—more violent than necessary—he bucked Kelly off and against the cupboard beneath the sink, scrambled to the door and looked out. An empty drive. Little bushes shivering in the wind. But no burglars.

"I thought we had one of 'em," Kelly said. Shaft turned slowly, gun in his hand, and considered shooting the dumb fuck. People that stupid were sure to make trouble in the future. Why not save the trouble now?

He put the gun back in its leather holster.

"Yeah, you were right on time," he said, and walked out of the kitchen to see if Arna was okay. She was. He wasn't. And he wasn't sure about Kelly.

Shaft made Arna go to bed. He wasn't concerned about her weariness; he just didn't want her moving through the house, picking up a hundred different memories off the floor, feeling the pain of each of them.

"If you can't sleep, just rest," he insisted.

His attitude drove Kelly away. Each time Shaft looked at the big, heavy-shouldered black man in his black suit of mourning he wanted to kick him in the ass as a reward for the debacle in the kitchen.

Kelly was making tentative noises about a power of attorney that would enable him to operate the businesses while Arna was in mourning.

"Later," Shaft said. There was no room for argument in his tone. Kelly left.

"Should we call the police?" Arna sighed. She gave the chaos a weary little half wave.

"No," Shaft said, "unless there's something big missing you need an insurance report on. And those cats weren't carrying anything when they went out the door except a lot of luck."

"I don't have. . . . What were they after, John?" He shrugged.

"Anything, everything. They read the death notices in the paper, find out what time the funeral is and move in. It's the best time. The people you're robbing are gonna be at the church or cemetery—and too screwed up to lock away their valuables."

"How awfull"

"Sure," he said, taking her arm, leading her toward the stairs. The support was welcome and she leaned heavily against him. Her breast pressed against him and he felt a sudden pulse of desire for her.

That breast—or was it the other one?—was as far as he'd gotten back when he dated her. It felt good then and it felt good now.

What variety of dirty bastard would try to fuck an old friend's recent widow, the tattered shred of his conscience asked? The best kind, he thought. Shit, it'd be the best thing in the world for this widow,

### *Shaft's Big Score*

for *any* widow, if she'd blow a couple of joints and get laid about three or four times—and that way get rid of all the anxiety and tension of her grief. And then sleep about twelve hours before getting up to face what remained of reality. Best goddamn thing in the world for widows, divorcees and assorted other nervous disorders.

Sure, he told himself, feeling the movement of the breast on his arm as they went up the stairs, that was a good thing, a kind thing.

But he didn't try it. He put Arna down on the bed, took away her shoes and covered her with a blanket.

"It'll all be picked up and put away when you get up," he said. He walked out feeling guilty—maybe about not having done her the small favor of a therapeutic roll in the hay. He wasn't sure.

## 6

"Bastard!"

Kelly's rage boiled up from his toes and out through his clenched teeth. He gripped the steering wheel of the big black Lincoln so hard his arms trembled.

"The sonofabitch!"

Shaft had to suspect something. The bastard was sniffing around like a dog after a bitch three counties away. He even *looked* at him like he knew!

Kelly jammed some of his anger down on the gas pedal and the long black Lincoln surged past sluggish streams of lesser cars, rocketing through the traffic on Myrtle Avenue like a runaway train. He made it to Brooklyn in record time, ignoring blaring horns and curses of outraged drivers. Only when

he reached Flatbush Avenue and remembered that he didn't know any of the police in the area did he ease up. There was enough trouble with Mascola without showing up with half the law in Brooklyn on his ass.

The shop of Augustas Mascola, flowers for every occasion, wedding and funeral arrangements a specialty, occupied the lower floor of a small, weathered brick building a few blocks from Prospect Park. It was an area of exclusive shops and elegant apartments; old Brooklyn, monied and conservative. The poodles squatted and defecated in human pathways with the same disdain they showed on Park Avenue. An elderly woman in a mink coat was discussing a floral arrangement with a young, dark-haired man when Kelly strode in. She seemed surprised; Mr. Mascola had a better class of colors in his customers.

"I would much prefer yellow mums," she said.

"Of course," the young man agreed, moving to the wall cooler.

"Mascola," Kelly said. "I have to see Mascola right away."

The young man's name was Sal Longo and he was as much a part of the Mascola family as his brother Jerry, Andy Pascal, Joe Rip, or Tony Foglio. His duties were simpler, of course, but no less important: to sell flowers and give them all a stamp of legitimacy.

"Mr. Mascola is busy," he said. "Go away, burrhead."

"I have to see him now." He ducked around the counter and headed for a curtained doorway at the rear of the shop. Except for the old lady, Longo might have shot him in the head.

"Well" she said.

Longo forced a smile and went on wrapping mums.

Mascola was pacing the small room that served as his office, talking in low, heated tones to Andy Pascal and Joe Rip. Pascal and Rip were two good men but they had failed to do a job and Gus wanted to know why. He was digging for answers when Kelly stepped into the room and closed the door behind him.

"What the hell do you want?" Mascola snarled.

He pointed an accusatory finger at Rip.

"He almost blew the whole thing!"

Joe Rip was six feet three inches of muscle, a strong-arm enforcer with a reputation as ominous as his name. He had been seated on a small couch taking in silence whatever Mascola cared to dish out, but he wasn't about to take anything from anybody else. He rose slowly to his feet.

"Get the nigger off my back, Gus." His voice was tiny for so big a man, a mere whisper.

Mascola glared at him. "Both of you relax."

Mascola turned his back on him and faced Kelly. "You came at a bad time."

"No. We got to straighten this out."

"There's nothing to straighten out. They didn't find the money."

"They didn't look good enough."

"They looked. Maybe they didn't look hard enough. Maybe they didn't have enough time."

"What are you going to do with a widow after a funeral—take her out night-clubbing? They had all the time there was."

Mascola eyed the black man sourly. His partner. That was the joke of the century. He was bringing a nigger into the fold for half a million dollars—maybe. All he had was the nigger right now—and he'd had to kill a man to get that.

"Joe . . . Andy . . . beat it. Go sweep out the store."

He waited until the two men had left the room and Kelly had seated himself on the couch.

"I'm running out of time, Kelly. If I don't get the money we got no deal. I can't stake a claim without cash in hand and if I don't come up with that cash I'll look like a fourflusher."

He paused a moment.

"And if that happens, Kelly—you're dead."

Kelly didn't think Mascola meant it. Not right yet, anyhow. Not while he still had some promise of delivering.

"It has to be in that house. It just has to be."

Mascola picked a pencil off the desk and rubbed the back of his ear with it. "Okay, I buy that. There must be a thousand places the boys didn't look. So the cash is in the house somewhere, but suppose the broad finds it. The money would be hers. She's his widow."

"No way!"

"That shake you up? Well, how does this grab you . . . maybe she knows where the money is. Maybe she's got her hands on it right now. Ever think of that?"

Kelly could only stare at him.

"This big spade who's sucking around her. What do you know about him? What the hell is he? Friend? Relative? What?"

"Friend," Kelly croaked, "an old friend from 'way back."

"And what does this *old friend* do for a living? Shine shoes?"

"He's a detective . . . a private detective. Not a real

cop. One of those guys who collects bills. He's staying with her. Said he'd look after her."

Mascola snorted.

"Sure. They're probably counting the fuckin' money right now. He'll look after her, all right."

"I don't know. . . ."

"You don't know your ass from a hole in the ground is what you don't know. Jesus."

He snapped the pencil in half and threw it against the wall.

"Get out of here. Go someplace where you got witnesses. Stay there. Get drunk, start a fight, I don't care if you go piss in the flowerpots outside the Waldorf, but let some people see you."

Kelly was getting up.

"We'll take care of this old friend of the family. Then you move in on that broad—move in and collect."

Shaft hadn't bent over so many times to pick up crap off the ground since his first three days in the Army. And his back hurt. Goddamn, but they'd made a mess. Every drawer had been dumped. Every bookcase toppled.

He may have been making it worse because he didn't know where anything belonged. Arna would never be able to find anything.

Why did people keep all this shit, anyhow? For years and years they collected things, stuck them in drawers or stacked them on shelves, but what the hell did it mean? Just a collection of junk for the burglars to throw on the floor. He made a mental note to throw away everything in his own collection of trash when he got back to his small, disorderly apartment—when he got *time* after he got back.

### *Shaft's Big Score*

He was in the living room and he picked up a picture of Cal, Arna and himself—smiles from long ago and far away. He suddenly realized why people saved things: they didn't have time to throw it all away. He tried to find the place the picture had been, looked again at the smiling faces.

"I married the solid dependable one," Arna said.

Shaft started. She had come down the stairs too quietly.

"Hey," he said. "Get some sleep?"

"Some," she said, coming into the room. She looked better, stronger. But the lines of shock were still cutting caverns and creases in young flesh that should have been full and fresh.

She took the picture from him, looked at it with a bite of her lip and a quiver against fresh tears. She put it back on top of a drink cabinet.

"Thank you for putting it all back together, John."

"I get twenty an hour and tokens . . . and you got a lot of time coming. Cal said he sent me a check for five thousand."

She sat down on the edge of a chair, seemingly afraid to lean back and relax. That would mean falling apart.

"Why?"

"Why what? The five thousand? I don't know. He had some kind of . . ."

"Why did they kill him?"

"That's simple. All you have to tell me is who 'they' are and I'll figure the reasons."

Arna shook her head.

"What about Kelly? Who is he?"

"A friend. A business friend. They were operating side by side—with burial insurance one of the big factors in the insurance field and the funeral home

collecting the payments when the person passed on. They decided to put it together and Albert had ideas on how to expand it."

"How much money is involved?"

She shrugged wearily. "I don't know, but a lot."

Shaft lit a cigarette and blew an idle stream of smoke at the ceiling. "What are your personal feelings about him?"

"I don't know. He's eager to help me. He's the only one who knows what any of it means."

Shaft thought about Kelly. Maybe the man was all right in his own way. It just wasn't Shaft's way. But whose was?

"You ought to be back in bed, Arna. You're rocking in your seat."

She shook her head. Her eyes burned in the hollows of her face, dark coals in the ashes of a private Phoenix.

"I can take naps for the rest of my life, but I'll never sleep easy . . . not until I know why he died." She was staring at him, expecting answers. Shaft leaned forward and stabbed out his cigarette in a saucer.

"We get down to the nitty-gritty, Arna. I can't help you unless you're willing to be honest with me."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean Cal wasn't killed in an accident. Somebody wanted him dead and did a good job of it. That's a fact you've got to face. Somebody wanted him dead. Which brings us to why."

"Everybody liked Cal," she whispered fiercely. "He didn't have an enemy in the world."

"He had at least one, baby. Maybe it was Albert J. Kelly."

She half-rose from her seat, her slim body arched like a strung bow.

"Never!"

Shaft motioned her to sit down. "I'm just pulling names out of a hat and I want you to do the same. I want you to think . . . and I want you to tell me the truth, even if it hurts like hell. There are three things people kill for, Arna—money, women and power. What was Cal fooling around with?"

She looked at him with anger. "You've been walking in the gutters of New York too long, Johnnie. Cal was your friend."

"I got friends who do some strange shit—weird, even—and some get killed, but they're my friends."

"Not Cal. He wasn't the kind of man who . . . who could do anything. . . ."

His face was hard. Arna Asby searched that face and found nothing that was of any comfort to her.

"Maybe," he said.

"You don't trust, do you, John?"

"No," Shaft said, "I don't trust anybody."

She shook her head sadly.

"That's not a good way to live," she sighed.

"I don't say it is," Shaft replied, "but it's a good way to keep from dying."

Joe Rip didn't like the contract. He usually worked alone. No mistakes, that way. And nobody to worry about while moving out afterward. Only he and the victim knew.

Now he was saddled with a partner who wasn't his choice, and he was stuck with a method that wasn't his own. Mascola dreamed up the plan and said that's the way it would be. He should have told Mascola to get another button, another punk like

Sal Longo. But he had said nothing. There was no retirement program or pension fund in his work. Now he was in the front seat of the truck, driving out to Queens with Sal Longo to do a job that he had no faith in.

"Do I go in first or do you go in first?" Sal Longo was wound up like a two-dollar clock. He was so keyed he couldn't drive the truck straight.

"What the hell difference does it make?"

"I just want to know. Christ, we gotta have a plan . . . we gotta have a method."

"Just get us there. You drive like you was drunk or somethin'."

Sal Longo scowled and turned his attention back to the road. The evening traffic was heavy going through Flushing and he tried to keep his mind on driving, but it was difficult. He had done a few things for Gus, but this was the first time Gus had trusted him enough to carry a gun. He was on an honest-to-God hit and there would be a five-grand bonus in his pocket if everything worked out right. He cast a sidelong glance at Joe Rip. The big man was staring straight ahead as though he didn't have a damn thing on his mind.

"It makes a difference, Joe, doesn't it?"

"Doesn't what?"

"Who goes in first."

"No," Joe Rip said tersely, "it don't mean a damn thing."

Sal Longo licked his lips. They were so dry it pained him to open his mouth. It had sounded clean and simple the way Gus had told them . . . just go to the house, deliver flowers, and hit the spade. With the spade out of the way, they could concentrate on the broad . . . make her talk . . . get the money Gus

*Shaft's Big Score*

wanted and then kill the broad. But now, driving through the darkness of Queens, he wondered about the mechanics. Would he do the shooting or would Joe? Would he work over the broad or would Joe?

"We ought'a get it straight, Joe. You know, what we're supposed to do."

"I know what to do," Joe Rip said in his soft voice.

"Sure you do, sure. It's just that . . . well, I'm not sure about . . . well . . . who goes in first."

The kid was a loser. Send him out to beat up whores, but not this. So why was he there? Gus had the idea that the money would be more secure if there were two guys instead of one. Pure crap. If he wanted the money, he could take it. A punk like Sal Longo couldn't have stopped him. All of Gus's family couldn't have stopped him. But he wasn't after money. He just wanted to do a good, clean job.

Sal Longo turned off Northern onto Bell Boulevard. "We'll be there in a few minutes, Joe."

Joe grunted.

"I still think we should get it straight . . . you know, the movements."

"Fuck the movements." Joe Rip turned his massive head and looked at Sal Longo's slim profile. He could tell by the way the punk was holding the wheel and straining forward that he was nervous as hell. He was about to pee in his pants.

"You don't think about a goddamn thing. You understand me, Sal? You just follow right along beside me carrying your goddamn flowers and you don't make one move unless I tell you to make it."

"Sure, Joe, sure. You're the boss." He sounded relieved.

*Shaft's Big Score*

Joe Rip put his right hand into the pocket of his raincoat and checked the wood grip and steel frame of the gun. Now there was a companion worthy of trust. And it didn't need no goddamn plan, either.

## 7

Shaft brought ice cubes in from the kitchen, got a bottle of Chivas out of the cabinet where Arna propped the picture, and made a drink.

Arna was just sitting there.

"Want a slug?"

"No. I'm afraid to let go."

He stared into his glass and swirled the melting ice around in the bottom of it.

"You either let go or you crack, Arna. That's Shaft's Law of Toil and Trouble."

She smiled just a fragment of a smile. And then she bent forward and began to cry, very softly, burying her face in the sleeve of her robe. Shaft sipped at the drink. If she needed help, he'd give it. But it was time now to let her handle this. He

finished the drink and made another—and still she wept. Let it all hang out, baby, he thought. And he turned away to look out the window, smiling just the fragment of a smile himself.

Nothing out there but night in the middle of January. Then the unmarked panel truck pulled up in front of the house. Two men got out and went to the back for something—one big man, one small, both white. The street light touched them with a piece of its illumination. What the hell were they doing?

They were getting out two large, oddly shaped packages. No . . . not packages. Flowers. Arrangements. And coming up the walk. Flowers at eight-thirty? Possible. Two delivery boys with one order. Unlikely. And white guys? Who among Cal's friends would send flowers from a white florist? Well, possible. He reached over and flicked out the light. Arna continued to cry without noticing.

One of them seemed to hesitate when the light went out; the other, the big one, kept coming. They bothered Shaft. That raincoat on the big one—on a delivery boy? And there was something flashing on the other one's hand. What flashed in the darkness besides diamonds? Here they came. The bell chimed. Shaft moved up close to the door.

"Yes—what is it?"

"Flowers—for Asby."

"Put 'em by the door. Everybody's in bed."

"Who is it, John?" Arna asked.

"Shhhhh." He hushed her with a finger to his lips.

"Can't—you got to sign."

Shaft pressed up tightly to the small window beside the door and peeked. They had flowers, all right. But the big motherfucker was wearing seventy-dollar alligator shoes. This was some delivery!

"Okay," he said, "just a minute."

He flicked on the porch light. Let 'em squirm. He whirled around and grabbed Arna, lifting her out of the chair.

"In the back," he whispered. "Get there and stay there."

"What?"

"Shut up—just go!"

He pushed her out of the room, grabbed his rain-coat from the chair near the door and found the automatic in the pocket. A small gun, the .380, but maybe the best pocket gun ever made.

He flicked off the thumb safety and went back to the door. If it was flowers, okay. If it was something else, that was now okay, too. He leaned over and unlocked the door then stepped back with a slight tug so it swung open.

"Come on in," he said, "while I find some change."

Sal Longo came first. He had flowers in one hand, a .45 Colt automatic in the other. Shaft shot him in the wrist and the whole goddamn house seemed to be blowing up with echoes as the .45 went off and flew away. Longo went straight up in shock. When he came down, Shaft's arm was around his throat and he was hugging him close. A shield, and they danced into the doorway together. Joe Rip put three bullets up the line of Longo's spine before Shaft, who was distracted by the screaming dance of the man he was holding, put two new holes in Joe Rip's head and sent his big body crashing off the porch like a disjointed camel.

Shaft watched the body land and lie motionless. One twitch and he would empty the clip of its five copper-jacketed wasps. But they don't twitch when you shoot them in the head. And Joe Rip didn't.

### *Shaft's Big Score*

But it occurred to Shaft that he was getting a cramp in his left arm. He flexed it and let the corded muscles relax. In the process, he dropped Sal Longo's body to the floor of the vestibule where it ruined a ninety-dollar Kerman runner by oozing on the design.

Worse than that, Shaft thought as he kicked a few fallen flowers on the corpse, he had to start all over with his housework and getting Arna calmed down. And his back hurt already.

Joe Rip and Sal Longo were probably lucky to be dead; he was mad enough to kick the shit out of both of them for that.

In Queens, it is easier to get a cab than a cop. The cabs either have a better radio system or they are more eager to get the work. So by the time the police arrived to investigate "report of shooting at a residence," a cab was waiting at the curb—clock running, of course—to take Shaft out of this godforsaken wilderness he thought of as suburbia and back across the bridge to the anti-civilization of Manhattan.

The cops found the bodies strewn on a field of flowers, Shaft in the kitchen frying an egg sandwich—it was important not to break the yolk until you put the egg on the bread, and then it all ran together and got mucked up with the ketchup.

One of the two young uniformed cops held a gun on Shaft while the other put in a call to the station and Shaft licked egg yolk and ketchup off his fingers. It was a great sandwich, but it dripped.

When Pete Bollin stepped delicately over the corpse of Sal Longo, paused a moment to look down at it, and then strolled into the kitchen, Shaft was drinking coffee and smoking a cigarette.

"You got ketchup on your chin," Bollin said.

"He wouldn't let me get a napkin without shooting me in the leg."

Bollin told the cop to go away. And Shaft opened one of the drawers, got out a napkin and dabbed at his chin.

"All beautiful again," Bollin said. "Where's the widow Asby?" He sounded all tough and nasty.

"You can talk to her down at the Police Commissioner's office."

He said it very seriously and Bollin felt it.

"Yeah," Shaft went on, "we're all going down there later. Me, the NAACP, some tough boys from CORE, couple other big black political types—you know Henry Johnson, the councilman? He's going, too. And we're gonna ask the Commissioner—all us black faces—why a dumb fuck like you didn't have a guard on this house protecting the widow of a man who'd been murdered."

Bollin's nostrils flared and the muscles in his jaws rippled against the pressure of clenched teeth.

"Don't you play professional nigger with me, you miserable cocksucker," he said. "I am going to put your ass in jail until this whole thing is cleaned up. Let's go."

"No. The Councilman said he was bringing over two lawyer friends of his. I think maybe one's a judge. And I should stay here until they arrive. Then we organize the delegation . . . Mr. Poleece-man."

Some of the air was going out of Bollin's officiousness. He had enough trouble without fighting the black political dealers.

"And," Shaft went on, "in the meantime, the widow is nice and safe—like she should have been in the first place—with police protection."

*Shaft's Big Score*

Shaft leaned back in his chair and eyed Bollin through a wreath of smoke. "I guess you want a statement."

"Sure. Who are the dead ones?"

"I don't know. They came in carrying flowers in one hand, guns in the other."

"And?"

"They tried to kill me so I tried to kill them."

Bollin felt exhausted after only three minutes of conversation with the man. Shaft, on the other hand, felt fine. He thought it was one of the best egg sandwiches he'd ever had.

"I want you to come down and make a complete statement."

"Before or after we talk to the Commissioner?"

"Fuck your talk with the Commissioner. You can come down in the morning when the stenographer's available."

"All right. Can I reach in my pocket and get out my gun?"

"Go ahead."

Shaft handed him the small automatic.

"The two holes in the big one's head came out of this. He shot the little one trying to get me."

"All right, get out of here while we clean up. I'll see you in the morning."

Shaft rose and picked up his raincoat.

"When the Councilman gets here, have him call me at home."

"Go screw yourself," Bollin said. "I'll ask him about the neighborhood rap on Asby's operation of the biggest policy wheel outside Manhattan. And how close you're tied to it."

Shaft was annoyed. This policy shit kept coming up like a bad old joke.

"Listen, I never even made a numbers bet," he said.

"And your best friend one of the biggest operators around," Bollin said, goading him. "Imagine that."

Yeah, imagine that. The straight-looking, straight-acting, totally dependable and upright leader of the community, Calvin Monroe Asby, *that* very same motherfucker was a big-time dealer in the numbers racket. Or that's the shit they were trying to lay on him.

"Yeah," Shaft said.

Bollin watched Shaft saunter out of the house, past the bodies without bothering to look at either one, and down to the cab. The man had some cool and knew how to contain it.

The men at Manhattan East, Vic Anderozzi among them, had told him Shaft was straight. But that's all.

"There's nothing he probably won't do," Anderozzi said. "To you or for you—depending whose side he's on. Sometimes I wanna kill him. Other times, he's straighter than most of the people I got on the squad here."

Bollin thought about it—and got to work sealing the house. Mr. Shaft was a hard nut. But nuts crack.

## 8

Knocks Persons wouldn't give six bits and a used whore for anything south of 110th Street. He didn't even look at the sleek emerald-green Fleetwood moving through the traffic in that part of town, arrogantly suggesting with its glittering that everything and everybody get out of the way.

His world was the black world of Harlem and the physical segregation of the community had made him wealthy. And all he'd done was cater to human nature. You want to cop a dream and get out of the ghetto on the skyrockets of the mind? Knocks'll have somebody get the needle. You want to smoke a little shit, roll some dice, or bet the number on the passing bus? Knocks'll get you the game.

And when the law came around and tried to

stop it all, reform these small bad habits or take its profit off the top, Knocks was up front all the way. He was the man. And he paid his dues. So many people had tried to take away his title as the unofficial recreation director of Harlem that there was hardly a part of his body without a mark on it. That's why they called him Knocks. But always with respect.

Willy turned the car onto Central Park South and glanced at the rigid form of his boss.

"Got this far without anybody taking a shot at us, anyhow," Willy said.

"Don't be so sure," Knocks rumbled in a voice scraped off the bottom of old wine casks. "Maybe they did—and missed."

The huge black mound of flesh and fiber chuckled. The flesh rippled under the black mohair suit and Willy felt the side of the Cadillac jiggle.

"Long as they keep missing," he said joining the laughter.

"Long as they keep trying," Knocks added. "When they stop, we know we got trouble because we don't have nothin' any more."

Gail Sharrett had never seen anyone that big in her life.

"Good evening, Mr. Persons and . . ."

"His name is Willy," Knocks said.

He shrugged out a vicuna overcoat that would have kept a small elephant warm in a large storm. She took it in both hands and struggled to hang it up. Willy stepped in quickly and helped.

"Give the lady your hat, Willy," he said.

Arthur Sharrett wheeled himself into the hall from the study, interrupting the formalities.

"Good evening, Knocks. Willy. Come in, come in."

Arthur Sharrett made a slight bow from the waist. His smile was so cold and forced that Willy backed up slightly; he had the feeling the old man was going to bite him in the leg.

A log burned brightly in the fireplace and the lights in the room were soft. Gus Mascola sat in a chair facing the desk, a snifter of brandy in one hand and a cigar in the other. He looked like a member of the Alcatraz Alumni Association after a good day's killing in the market—or even the street. Mascola was sweating out what might be happening in Queens. Joe Rip and Sal were out in the great unknown. They might be driving back to Brooklyn with five hundred thousand dollars. And he had this crazy meeting with Sharrett! The brandy was sour in his throat. The cigar was brass in his mouth.

"You know Knocks Persons, of course, Gus."

Mascola got to his feet and nodded as Sharrett glided noiselessly into the room. Knocks made the floor creak as he followed after him."

"Knocks—how are ya?"

"Just fine, Gus. Just fine."

Mascola sat back in his chair and downed his drink. He didn't like the idea of Willy being there, but he knew enough about Persons to know that where he went, Willy went. The tall, razor-thin black man was more than Knocks' bodyguard; he was a shadow.

Arthur Sharrett wheeled into position behind his desk and studied the faces of the men across from him—strong, ruthless men. Men of power and action. Sharrett envied them the action, but he had the power to make them move.

"All the rest of the group will be in town Thursday," Sharrett said. "But I wanted you and Gus to

meet first, iron out any conflict of interests you may have."

Knocks stirred uncomfortably in his chair. It was a large one, but not large enough. "No conflict," he said, "but so far as I know, I ain't joined yet."

Sharrett nodded. "I assume you wish to."

"If it pays."

"It pays. Dollar for dollar, better than anything you have going in Harlem—or Gus here has in Brooklyn or Reuben Sanchez can find in Miami or Jake Pierce in Houston. That's why they're in. That's why you're coming in."

The old bastard was very sure of himself, Knocks thought. And it bothered Knocks. Smart men are always a little doubtful, questioning. That's how they get smart.

"Our current project is loan pool," he went on. "The point is to eliminate the small-time, unreliable hustler, take over the loan-shark activities he provides by sheer weight of dollars available for action and collect the rewards of unlimited, unregulated interest—each of you in an *exclusive* territory, I might add."

"I already got an exclusive territory," Knocks said.

"But that's all you have," Sharrett said, "as large an operation as it may be. That's all it is—just Harlem. Without external resources or outlets for diversification in a changing economy. Are you sure Harlem will survive the combined attacks of black militancy and urban renewal? What do you do with a street-corner operation after the corner is eliminated? All I'm putting to you here is the proposition that by combining our forces—and our funds—we eventually can operate on each and every corner in the country!"

It was almost 3:00 A.M. when Willy turned the car north on Lenox Avenue. It was the hour when all the fights start and the closing down of the regular bars begins—just before the whorehouses and the after-hours joints start up and the winners come out to spend their loot while the losers sneer in envy.

"It don't look like a dyin' business," Willy said.

"Used to be a stable over there on the corner run by a man who said the same thing."

Willy guessed they were now going into the big-time loan business.

There was a telephone in the Mercedes but Mascola rarely used it. Any ham-radio operator could pick up the calls. He might use it to call his barber or his tailor or a broad, but nobody important. He ordered Jerry Longo to drive to a bar on Sixtieth and Eighth and while Jerry double-parked, Mascola went inside and used a public booth. He dialed a number in South Brooklyn. Andy Pascal answered.

"How did the delivery go?"

"It didn't."

"Why not?"

"There was a big traffic jam. There's probably a story about it in the *Daily News*. There's another one in there about two guys who got killed out in Queens by some private detective guarding a house."

"I'll read it."

The Mercedes was back in Brooklyn before Mascola calmed down enough to advise Jerry Longo that he was being promoted to a position of some importance where he, too, would have an opportunity to die for the greater glory of greed.

## 9

Shaft felt a sense of amusement. That bastard Cal Asby had them all fucked in the head. He was probably laying there in the big brass box laughing his ass off. Big businessman! Bullshit. He sat in the back of the taxi, glaring out the window at the passing desolation of used-car lots and asked himself some questions. Wouldn't it have been difficult, he thought, for Cal to have been in the numbers racket without Arna finding out about it? The profits were enormous and sooner or later he would have to move that money around—more money than his legitimate business could have brought in. Arna was smart, very smart. There was no way Cal could have had such big money around without her asking questions about it. Just no way.

"She had to know!" he said.

The driver glanced over his shoulder.

"Know what?"

Shaft looked at him and felt some embarrassment at talking out loud. He was getting nutty in his old age.

"How to make an egg sandwich," he said.

Silently, the driver agreed. His fare was a fruitcake full of pecans and he didn't look drunk, either. But how can you tell with a spade?

The No Name was still open, the cluster of orange globes it wore as a tarnished tiara spilling gold onto the gray slush of Jane and Hudson Streets. The jukebox was ripping off the peace the drinkers sought in the vodka.

It was a temptation to Shaft, who stood for a moment in front of the bar, directly across Hudson Street from the squat white building where he had two and a half rooms with kitchen, bath and dust. He'd have to face Arna if he went home and she'd have to face his questions. Wouldn't it be better if she got some sleep and he got stoned and laid? It was simple and practical, but his feet turned toward responsibility. Shit!

He'd given Arna his only set of keys, so he had to pound on his own door and lean on the bell. He hoped she wasn't too far gone with exhaustion. It could all have waited until the morning. Except it couldn't wait. There were motherfuckers around who didn't wait for nothing. They killed people. Maybe her. Maybe him. Could he wait for them? And who were they?

He rang and pounded, then pushed the door with his shoulder and heard the lock groan. He heard an-

other sound at the same time—Arna's voice, shrill with terror.

"Who's there? Who is it?"

"John Shaft."

"Thank God!"

A table fell over as she blundered across the dark living room. Shaft could hear something splinter as it hit the floor. He hoped it was only an ashtray and not one of his lamps. He didn't give a shit about the lamps, but he hated sweeping up. The door flew open while he was still thinking about it and Arna Asby was pressing up against him, her arms clasped about his waist and her head pressed into his chest. Her hair was loose and warm from the bed, but her body was tense, every muscle drawn taut. Her small, high breasts were flattened like raisin-dotted muffins against him. He had never been so conscious of a woman's body in his life. His own body stirred and he fought it. For Christ's sake, not *now*.

"Oh, God," she moaned. "I didn't know what was happening. I thought it was more of them, after. . . ."

He touched her hair in spite of his two-second vow of celibacy with widows. "Easy . . . easy."

The perfume of her body was intense. Women get warm under the blankets and all the good smells come out.

"Come on . . . get back to bed. You'll freeze your . . . your feet out here."

She clung to him as he pushed the door shut, locked it and moved with her into the living room in a tango glide. Anybody else in his arms, he'd have cued his free hand, the one that wasn't holding her, to strip down to his shorts and even out of them in the eight or ten steps from the doorway. It wasn't easy, but if you practiced. . . . But he stepped away

### *Shaft's Big Score*

from her and switched on the lights. All she had broken was a dirty cup. Fuck it.

"I'm sorry I woke you up."

"I was just staring at the walls." She sat on the edge of the couch and drew his terry robe tighter across her body.

"Want some coffee?" he asked lamely.

She shook her head and stared at the carpet. Her misery was absolute. Shaft wanted to talk to her. He wanted to get right to the point, but he didn't torture lost animals, either. He bent to pick up pieces of the cup and put them on the edge of a small, nicked-up end table which was as brown as he was through years of neglect.

"I didn't mean to bust up your house."

"Forget it. I only come in here to break a cup every now and then myself."

It was only when he was down on one knee looking for stray chips that he noticed how clean the place was. The carpet had been swept and all the wood in the room gleamed with a patina of lemon oil.

"Somebody's been sneaking in here to steal dirt," he said. "What hit the place? A white tornado?"

Her smile was weak, but it was a smile. "You have your colors confused, but I had to do something to keep from going crazy. Some women drink. I scrub floors."

Shaft picked up the pieces of the cup, took it into the kitchen and tossed it into the trash bucket under the sink.

"She doesn't know a damn thing," he argued with himself. The trash bucket refused to comment. On his way back, he picked up a bottle of Scotch, got two glasses from the cupboard and sat down beside Arna.

"Okay. You scrubbed the floor. Now have a drink with me."

"At three in the morning?"

"I know. I usually wait until 8:00 A.M. to start, but I'm nervous."

He poured two.

"I asked you whether Cal was involved with anything. You didn't know of anything."

"I . . . I said he wasn't that kind of man." Her voice was hollow.

"He was in the numbers racket with Kelly. They ran a big wheel, a bank."

He had just laid it on her with all the tact of a traffic cop who caught him doing seventy in a school zone. He hadn't been sure what her reaction would be—and that's why he did it that way.

He swallowed Scotch. "The cops had been on to it for a long time, but they never had enough to bust him. The numbers racket is a nickel and dime business, like a candy store or a newsstand. Except the nickels and dimes become millions and millions. The only difference is that people who run numbers banks send their kids to school in Switzerland and fly them over in their own jets. So tell me, Arna, just for the record, how did the checkbook balance out at your house?"

It was so silent in the room that they could hear the soft whirr of the electric clock in the kitchen. Arna reached for her glass and sipped at it.

"We paid our bills, paid our taxes, lived well and saved little. Do you believe that, John?"

"Do you?"

He poured himself another drink, spilling some on the table. It annoyed him. He could go through a

brawl as gracefully as a ballet dancer and then turn as clumsy as a toad.

"I wanted to believe," she said quietly, "but I knew something was going on. Something that I wasn't supposed to know. Secret transactions between Cal and Kelly. Once I came across some money in his desk drawer at the office . . . several thousand dollars in big bills. I asked him about it, but Cal had an explanation about paying a bill in cash to help a friend."

"And you believed him?"

She stared down at her hands.

"He was my husband. People trust each other. . . ."

To hell with it. He didn't want to try to take her apart.

"Have another slug and go back to bed. I just came home to change my shirt."

"I'd like to talk."

He put a hand on her shoulder and turned her gently toward him.

"Later. We'll talk about it, but not now. You're on somebody's list, baby. There's a contract floating around town with your name on it. Or maybe mine now. I got to find out the who and the why or you won't have a second of peace for the rest of your life—which might be like two days. I don't want to scare you, but that's the way it is. You must know something that—"

She cut in on him with a sharp cry. "No! I swear to Jesus. I don't know anything!"

He needed both hands to keep her from jumping off the couch.

"Okay, okay. But somebody *thinks* you do. That's the same thing. You're a threat. They want to take

you out and they work fast. They don't get paid by the hour."

He could have held her down with a feather now. He was talking fast and he was glib, but the meaning was getting through to her.

"What can I do?"

He could barely hear her. "Nothing. You stay here and you don't go out of the place for one damn thing until I get back."

He reached under the coffee table to the spring holster tacked there with upholstery studs and came out with the .38 Detective Special hidden there. Shaft put it in her lap. She couldn't have been more shocked if he had dropped a snake on her.

"A gun?"

"That's right. A gun. You hold it in your hand and pull the trigger. Make sure you point it in the right direction. If anybody tries to come through that door, shoot."

She nudged the gun away from her with the tip of one finger. "I don't think I could."

"You can," he said, "if you remember how easy they did it to Cal and tried with you."

He walked into the bedroom away from her grimace of pain. The black suit he wore to Cal's funeral was a rumpled sack and he changed quickly into slacks, a turtleneck and a thigh-length leather car coat in which a girl he knew who made sandals had sewn a long narrow pouch and a loop of leather just over the left hip. On the inside of the closet, up above the door, there was a nail and on the nail hung a Smith and Wesson .44-40 he got in a West Side hockshop. It was big enough to kill an elephant. Not just tired old elephants—but fresh young ele-

phants. The shells were in a Ritz cracker box on the top of his dresser.

The gun went into the sling, a handful of shells in his pocket and, at twenty feet, he became about as dangerous as a kangaroo with a pouch full of nitro-glycerin. He liked the feeling. He didn't hear Arna come into the room, but he could sense her presence.

"You oughta knock before coming into a man's bedroom."

"I don't like what you're doing."

He grinned at her.

"Just going to work," Shaft said.

"If I just went away somewhere, would they—?"

"No," Shaft said, "they wouldn't. Whoever set up this game dealt you a hand in it. They didn't let you look at all the cards, but that's all right—now. 'Cause I'm playin' your hand for you. And if there's one game in all this fucked-up city I know how to play, this one is it."

## 10

Junior Johnson felt happy to be alive. It was cold, but the sun was shining and the air was crisp and clean. A good day. He walked down the avenue, past the snaggle teeth of beat-up stores, with his head high and his shoulders squared. From time to time he would catch a glimpse of himself in a window and he liked what he saw. He was a young man on the move, sharp of suit and clear of eye. And his pockets rustled with green leaves of prosperity. A good day, and getting better. Junior Johnson was a contented man—for the moment. He had ambitions. He wanted to do better. Not that he was doing so badly. He was making three hundred a week and that was two hundred dollars more than any of his friends were making. But his friends weren't as clever as he was. Junior Johnson

believed that the way some believed in God. He was smarter. He was maybe the smartest man in Queens, black or white. One day every mother in the city would wake up to the fact. He was rising up the ladder, right up to the blue sky, and there was no way anyone could stop him.

His heels clicked a rhythm on the sidewalk. He paused for a moment in front of a grocery store and admired his image in the glass. He did a little mashed-potato step, tilted his skinny brim hat lower over his eyes and danced into the store.

"Asby-Kelly man," he called out cheerfully.

There was no one in the place that early in the morning except the owner and his wife, a middle-aged couple as scarred by time as the counter and shelves.

"Morning, Junior," the man said.

Junior Johnson was doing a number.

"You looking lucky today, man. And what'll it be?"

"Nine ninety-nine," the woman said.

Junior Johnson whipped a notebook from his back pocket, and a ballpoint from under his coat.

"Three nines it is. Mmmm, that's a number got some hair on it!"

Junior Johnson laughed—but not too hard. He knew how to deal with his customers and their dime and dollar search for pie in the sky. He also recorded the woman's standing wager on 422. He didn't know where she got it, but it was her number, her only number, just as 871 was Mrs. Abigail Greene's and 273 was old man Washington's. Always were, always would be.

He took the money—one dollar from each. Two dollars a day. Five days a week. Fifty-two weeks of the year. A total of five hundred and twenty dollars

from this pair alone. Good customers. They deserved to hit once in a while. But that was pie in the sky; the sweet slices came few and far between. But if you hit. Oh, it was *so* good! All that money in nice green bills that the tax man didn't know about. Money to spend, money to spree, money to bust out of the god-damn awful boredom and bleakness of this ordered existence within the fold of poverty. That's why you played, always bought a dime or a dollar worth of hope. Always was, always would be.

Junior's pace slowed toward the middle of the afternoon. He was still a bundle of energy, but his legs got a bit heavy on the back stretch of the turf. The business establishments had given way to the apartment houses and none of the buildings had elevators. So it was up the stairs, one floor at a time, stopping at more than half of the doors.

"Asby-Kelly man."

The chipped and stained door of apartment 406 opened the width of its security chain and a young, still pretty black girl pressed her face to the crack.

"I don't have the money today."

Junior Johnson just smiled and leaned into the door frame.

"Only three dollars. You wanna keep up your burial policy, don't you?"

"I ain't anywhere near dead yet," the girl said.

Junior Johnson moved a little closer to the door.

"But the policy is—less you got a way to keep it up."

The girl hesitated and then slipped the chain off the slide and opened the door fully. The way her breasts moved beneath the acrylic sea-green sweater intrigued him. Junior was thinking he'd like to try

it flat on his back, letting the movement take place an inch or so from his eyes—and mouth.

"Maybe we could work out something," she said.

Junior Johnson sighed deeply. He hated to refuse, but if he gave in to one he'd have to give in to several. Collecting brought him into contact with many women, from bored housewives to hookers. If he relaxed his work rules, he could drown in a sea of pussy. He wanted the money.

"Sorry, sugar. Maybe we better save that action for when I got a little more time."

The girl's smoky suggestiveness faded.

She walked off into the small, dark apartment and returned with three one-dollar bills and two quarters in her hand.

"Here's the three dollars for my policy, an' fifty cents for a number," she said glumly.

He took the money, dropped it into his pocket and went through the ritual of the notebook.

"What number?"

"Two sixty-nine," she said.

Junior Johnson got the message and thought about that, too, as he went down the dark stairwell from the fifth floor. A fine fox, and one of these evenings, after the day's run. . . . That's where his head was as he reached the fourth-floor landing, a smile across his face, when a long arm reached out of the shadows and looped about his throat. There was also something round, cold and metallic pressed against his head, just under the right ear. A strangled sob leaked out of his throat.

"Oh, don't shoot me, mother."

Junior Johnson's head, so filled with the pleasures of

occasional passion one moment, shrieked now with dizzying panic.

"Take the money," he croaked. Money's nothing. Money's shit. But this—this was goddamn dying.

Shaft loosened his arm just a trifle, but poked the gun barrel against Junior's quivering head even harder.

"I don't want your money, Mr. Asby-Kelly man. I just want to talk."

"Talk?" He was in the hands of a maniac. A six-foot maniac with the world's largest gun who wanted conversation. "Sure . . . sure, I'll talk. What do you wanna talk about?"

"Kelly. Albert J."

Junior Johnson's scattered senses were rapidly coming back together. The sonofabitch wasn't a mugger and he wasn't a psycho. Maybe a cop. He could be anything at all. It was hardly the time or the place for speculation, so he just let his face go blank and looked ignorant.

"You talkin' about Mr. Kelly? At the funeral home?"

"You know who I'm talking about."

"Yes, sir. I sure do. I work for Mr. Kelly an' Mr. Asby. . . . only Mr. Asby got himself killed in an accident. I knew Mr. Asby a whole lot better than I do Mr. Kelly . . . yes, sir. I hardly know Mr. Kelly at all, to tell you the honest truth. In fact—"

Shaft pulled the gun around and stuck it in Junior's babbling mouth, the metal clicking against teeth, pinching the flesh of lips.

"Say good-bye to your fucking empty head," Shaft told him. "I don't need it any more."

Junior shook so hard he began to urinate, the brain being connected to the bladder by a cord of fear.

### *Shaft's Big Score*

Shaft let him shake, then took the gun away an inch or so. And Junior Johnson started talking sense.

Beautiful, Shaft thought, moving away from the building. The clown hadn't known everything. He had seen the Asby-Kelly operation from a single viewpoint. But he had seen enough. And told enough. Shaft broke into a run, startling the shoppers along Northern Boulevard, creating a small flurry of consternation until he dropped from sight down the steps of the Queens Line subway—a man in motion, moving almost as quickly as his mind.

## 11

There had to be an answer to fit the question that went 'round and 'round through Kelly's head. He sat at a table neither tasting nor feeling the drink in his hand. And he wasn't getting an answer.

Where's the fucking money, Kelly?

Bang, bang, bang—like a pile driver. Where?

He tried to sort out the possibilities. The money had been there. He had counted it himself after he and Cal pulled it out of the safety-deposit vault of the bank in Flushing. Five hundred and one thousand, six hundred and fifty-five dollars. He stared at the drink and saw the stacks and wads of bills, not the ice cube floating on the amber pond.

The year's take off the top. It had been enough for Cal. That was all he wanted, his half. But he had no

### *Shaft's Big Score*

vision. They had a gold mine, an oil field, a diamond bed. There was no limit and Cal wanted only the surface gleamings, this piddling half a million. The dumb, stubborn sonofabitch.

"You going to sit there all day again?"

That was another question. It came from the day bed along the wall of the plastic and pop-purple living room of the small apartment and the girl who was lying in it, examining her upraised foot. It was a very elegant foot attached to a very elegant body. The foot and the body were both bare, except for a little polish on the toenails.

"I pay the rent," Kelly snapped. "If I want to hang around, that's my business."

The way she rolled the fine young body off the couch would normally have aroused his interest and sent them both to the floor, the bed, the couch or up against the wall in an embrace of instant seeking. She had a very elegant body, the soft beige of clean sand, the pubic triangle black and flossy between slender, sloping hips.

"Oh, yes, Mr. Man," she jived him, "you pays the rent and you is the lord and master!"

Rita's mistake was to come close and lean forward as she taunted.

"But you ain't been any good for a goddamn thing for three days."

His hand left the drink and caught her on the side of the head with enough force to spin her half around.

"Shut up," he said unnecessarily, for his message was as clear as her inability to comply.

"You sonofabitch!" she cried, hands to her aching face, dancing away from him toward the bedroom doorway. "You hit me! You hit me!"

Big fucking deal, he thought. Most of the broads in

### *Shaft's Big Score*

town needed to get hit in the mouth once in a while—and half of them did. Big deal.

"Nigger pig!" she screamed.

Kelly's chair flipped backward as he jumped to his feet. He was moving in her direction on the balls of his feet like a boxer, and his left was coming out in a sharp, open-hand hook.

Rita ran, big beautiful ass bouncing like small pillows being fluffed back into shape. Kelly stopped short. So did she, whirling around in the doorway.

"I'll kill you!" she screamed. "You hit me again and I'll kill you, you dirty bastard!"

He made a false lunge and she disappeared in a flash down the hallway.

Kelly turned to the window and looked out and down into West 130th Street. Dumb little fox. But worth keeping around when he felt like digging her movement and her freshness. But now she was just a pain in the ass.

Kelly looked down at the Con Ed crew ripping up the pavement. Another hole. More goddamn holes in the streets of the city than people. He was in a hole, too. Where was the fucking money?

Buried someplace—buried in a hole in the ground, maybe.

And then he thought of the only hole where it might have been placed. It was impossible, of course. But the only place it could be. There was a fine dew of sweat on Kelly's forehead as the thought took over his body and propelled him toward the door. It was the sweat of fear, the apprehension that he might be wrong.

He grabbed his jacket off the back of a chair.

"I'll be back in a couple hours," he called to Rita.

### *Shaft's Big Score*

She should give a shit, the girl thought, holding a cold washcloth to her bruised face.

Shaft was standing next to a newsstand about thirty yards from the Con Ed crew when Kelly came out of the red-brick highrise, the glossy haven of the spade who's made it. It rose like an insult to all the failure around it, a fifteen-story finger that said up yours to the old neighborhood.

Junior Johnson hadn't known much about the corporate structure of Asby-Kelly, but he had known the dirt. He had known who his boss was sleeping with—and where.

There was no Albert J. Kelly listed on the lobby directory, but there was an R. Towne, apartment 12-16. Shaft jabbed the buzzer with a flat thick finger, telling himself how much he disliked Kelly.

"Who is it?"

The fox. An angry voice. Mean and pissed off.

"Got a message for Mr. Kelly," he said.

"So have I," she said, "but the sonofabitch isn't here. Go away."

Shit! He leanged against the bell again. He almost fell into the apartment when the door opened with a jerk, wide enough to reveal the angry form of Rita Towne. There was a livid bruise on her cheek.

"I said he's not here."

"That's too bad. When do you expect him?"

"I don't know. . . . What do you want?"

That bruise on her face. She'd been clobbered.

"I'd like to meet whoever put that mark on you—and fix him up with a sling for his arm."

Anybody who wanted to break Kelly's arm was a friend of Rita's and she smiled at the prospect.

"You got a message for him?"

"I'm thinking it would be better if I was getting a message through to you."

He grinned at her and she stepped back, letting him move into the room.

"Any bad friend of Kelly's is a good friend of mine."

Shaft closed the door behind him and leaned against it, looking at Rita Towne. The gauzy wrap she wore wouldn't cover the check for coffee at the automat.

"You always walk around like that?"

She shrugged. "Clothes are bad for the body. They stifle you."

"Is that a fact?"

"They cut out the air. If you wore clothes around your face you'd die."

Shaft looked again at the body and thought he'd change his name to John L. Crazy before he disagreed.

"Guess you're right, at that."

"Of course I am." She moved across the room and poured herself on the couch like chocolate syrup.

"You like my body?"

He didn't respond.

She giggled. "That's 'cause I let it breathe. I bet you've got a nice body—only you're choking it to death. You're shutting off the air to the pores."

He walked toward her with the honest intention of proving he was as opposed to choking his body as almost anybody.

"Sure is a pity," she murmured.

"What is?"

"Letting your body suffer the lack of air."

"What can I do about it?"

"You can start by takin' off your coat."

He took off his coat.

### *Shaft's Big Score*

"I'm breathing, I'm breathing," he said.

She eyed him dubiously. "You still aren't gettin' no air."

"But I'm trying," he insisted.

He stripped the turtleneck over his head and tossed it into a chair. He really felt like a damn fool. "Is this what you and Kelly do? Breathe on each other?"

She stuck out the tip of her tongue. "Sometimes, only he ain't been getting any air at all lately."

Standing in his pants and shoes looking at the girl, Shaft felt a little close for air himself.

"There's one thing I do, it's breathe a lot," he said, bending over, pulling at a shoelace.

"Good," she said. "What's your name?"

"Oxygen . . . Oxygen Jones," he told her as the pants came off, the shorts along with them.

Rita inhaled deeply.

Kelly sat in Cal Asby's chair in Cal Asby's office in the funeral home, and looked through tall Gothic windows at the boarded-up ruin of the Asby-Kelly Insurance building. The blast should have been the start of a new life, a fuller and richer life—especially richer. Cal had been a fool, a small-timer. He had been ignorant of the forces that shaped the city. He had believed in the little man and some piss-ant idea of staying in his own backyard and not trying to play with the big tough kids down the street. And the motherfucker had almost dragged them both down.

And still might. He knew that he must find the money and find it fast. Gus Mascola wasn't a man to make idle threats. He'd drop him into the middle of

Long Island Sound with his feet in a barrel of cement.

Like Cal himself, the money was buried.

He struggled to get a grip on himself. Sweat was popping out on his forehead and running down the side of his face.

The money had been in the safe. Cal had removed it and hidden it. That was basic. That was all he had to go on. Did he take it home? Did he manage to sneak it out during the day and place it in a safety-deposit vault? Did he give the money to John Shaft? He had asked himself all those stupid questions again and again and each one seemed remote, and yet the money was gone. What happened was the earth had opened and swallowed it up—as simple as that.

“Can I talk to you a minute, Mr. Kelly?”

He almost jumped out of his skin. But it was only Donald Forest standing in the doorway with a broom in his hand, not one of Mascola's hoods with a shotgun.

“What do you want, Donald?” Kelly asked, his voice strained, heart warming like a rivet gun turned on.

The elderly janitor shifted his feet uneasily. “If it ain't convenient to talk right now, I could come back.”

“It's okay . . . what is it?”

Forest cleared his throat noisily. “Well, sir, I been workin' here a long time . . . a real long time, an' I ain't never asked for much. . . .”

Kelly cut in on him impatiently. “You want a raise? Is that it, Donald?”

“Yes, sir. I was fixin' to ask Mr. Asby the other night, but he was kinda busy, an' then with him gettin' hisself killed an' all, I didn't think it was right to ask you, but I sure could use a little extra—”

“You saw Cal the other night? Where? Next door?”

### *Shaft's Big Score*

Forest's smile was almost patronizing. "You know I don't do no cleaning up next door, Mr. Kelly."

"No . . . of course you don't. Where did you see him?"

"Downstairs, 'bout a half hour before the explosion."

"What was he doing?"

Forest scowled and scratched the side of his jaw. "Doin'? He weren't doin' nothin' in particular, just standin' in the hall."

Kelly took a deep breath to calm himself. He had to coax information out of the old fool or he'd get confused and forget everything he'd seen. Easy, baby, easy.

"He must have been doing something, Donald. He wouldn't have come over here just to stand in the hall."

"No, sir . . . I don't reckon he would've done a thing like that. I figured he was on his way up here to do some work or leave off something for you all."

"Who was with him, Donald?"

"Nobody. Just him."

"Did he have anything with him?"

Donald looked puzzled.

"With him? Oh, yeah. A package of some kind . . . papers, maybe."

Kelly rose slowly from his seat and walked around the desk. "And did he bring those papers up here?"

Forest struggled to remember. The effort was clearly painful. "No, sir . . . I don't think he came up here. I think he went into the casket room. Sure, he went into the casket room 'cause when I came back from the basement, I found the door open and I always keep that door closed at night to keep the dust off the boxes."

Kelly began to laugh—the laughter of relief, the

*Shaft's Big Score*

laughter of the condemned man cheating the noose. The casket room! The poor sonofabitch had hidden the money in his own coffin. The earth had swallowed it up after all.

Donald Forest stared at him as though he had gone mad, then he began to laugh, too, thinking that maybe he'd missed something. It was always good to laugh when the boss laughed.

"Donald," Kelly said finally, catching his breath, "how big a raise you need?"

"Three . . . maybe five dollars?"

"You just got yourself twenty."

And he laughed again. Donald did again, too, although he was so pleased he almost cried.

Twenty goddamn beautiful dollars!

## 12

There was no such term as love-making in Rita Towne's vocabulary. She was a performer in the circus of the bedroom, a trapeze artist, a high-wire dancer, and she was a star. She used Shaft like another piece of equipment and about halfway through the gasping, clutching encounter he got the feeling that she would rate him as good, better or superior in quality as a piece of ass. It made him try harder.

She directed his actions with her body, coaxing and teasing him into one performance after another. He really felt unnecessary. If he could have unscrewed his cock he would have given it to her to play with. He was getting tired of bouncing off the bed, or carrying her around the apartment glued to his groin.

She was a deep pit that could never be filled, a fire that could never be cooled.

"How about a cup of coffee?" Shaft asked. He lay on the bedroom floor, his left foot caught in a tangle of sheets while the acrobatic Rita did languid push-ups on his chest.

"Don't talk," she whispered. "Fuck."

He stroked the long curve of her spine and let his fingers drift around the globe of her buttocks.

"I don't think Kelly does his homework."

The name made her stiffen. Rolling off of him she leaned against the side of the bed and wiped the deep hollow between her breasts with an edge of the sheet.

"He was a good man . . . once. But he hasn't been worth nothin' in a long time."

Shaft yawned. "I guess he's been too busy for it. A man like that must have all kinds of things in the fire."

She smiled and cuddled beside him, cradling her head in the depression below his collarbone, her right hand slipping down across the flat-lands of his belly to seek and to fondle.

"Speakin' of things in the fire."

She had a one-track mind. And he had only one slightly chafed and bruised remnant of tissue to give to this investigation. Even his back hurt as they rolled together away from the bed. He tried to conjure a sexual fantasy that would sustain him through this effort. He flashed on the image of the very sweet-looking and almost illegally young dental technician who worked in an extraction clinic on the same floor of his Times Square office building. She had come into his office one morning—after several casual nods in the lobby and hallway—to ask softly and gently

### Shaft's Big Score

through cupid's-bow lips if she could hoist her pure white nylon uniform over slender, lithe legs and squat on his cock for about ten or fifteen minutes to relieve a nervous headache. He thought about that and labored over Rita.

"I'm coming!" she cried. Thank God, he thought.

They lay silent for a few moments, each reflecting on a private world. Shaft almost went to sleep in his reverie.

"Hey... hey...."

Rita was shaking his shoulder, trying to rouse him, but not for an encore. She had an animal's instinct for danger and although she enjoyed the feel of the long, hard body on top of her, she didn't want it there when Kelly came back.

"I'll make you some coffee, okay?"

"Okay," he mumbled. He rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling. A patch of sunlight flickered there, the last tiny candle of the dying day. A day that had fled, leaving him nothing to show for it. He swung around to a crouch and stood, suddenly very much awake. Oh, this was really helping Arna. She'd appreciate his efforts at keeping her alive.

"Did you find them, John?"

"No, Arna, I was busy screwing my brains out today. Maybe tomorrow, if nothing better turns up."

Shit! He was a great help, a real tower of straw. He cursed his way into the living room where his clothes lay scattered like discards at a rummage sale. He dressed quickly, watching the girl putter around in the kitchen, putting a kettle on to boil, measuring drip grind into the aluminum basket of a coffee maker. She was, he noted wryly, wearing a robe—smothering her body, choking off the air, but maybe her fantasies only existed in the daytime.

### *Shaft's Big Score*

"How do you like your coffee?"

"Black," he said, shrugging into his coat.

"That's good, because we're out of cream."

He kept his eyes on her as he walked into the kitchen. She had two cups out on the table flanking a plate of Oreo cookies. She had the water boiling and was in the act of pouring a measured amount on top of the coffee grounds. She seemed to be enjoying herself. Not quite so much as she had been twenty minutes earlier, but still enjoying this ritual.

She glanced over her shoulder at him. "You can sit down."

He pulled a chair away from the table and straddled it while she brought the coffeepot over and poured the steaming liquid, handing him a cup and pushing the plate of cookies within reach.

"You know Kelly long?"

"Long enough," he said.

"You work for them?"

He took a sip of coffee. "Maybe. Why?"

She smoothed back her hair with both hands, an action that caused her breasts to move under the light silk robe. "Just wondering, is all. I mean . . . if you work for 'em maybe you'll be comin' around here once in a while."

"Could be."

He held out his cup for a refill. The girl probably knew as much about Kelly's activities as Kelly did. But she wasn't like that fool in the tenement.

"You'd better watch your step, baby," he said. "You wouldn't want to lose a big important man like Kelly because of me."

Her laughter was high-pitched. "A big man? Kelly? You think they'll let him be a big man?"

Shaft swallowed coffee to keep from saying any-

thing. There wasn't a damn thing he could add to the conversation. She leaned toward him, her eyes bright with anger and scorn.

"Are you a big man? Tell me . . . they let you do big things, or just run errands? Kelly's a fool and so are you. Mascola hates niggers—black, brown, or high yella. I know. Believe me, Mr. Whatever-your-name-is, I know."

Mascola. The name slid easily into Shaft's mind. There was a place for it in his memory bank, an empty niche between punk and pervert. Gus Mascola, the Brooklyn strong man, the Flatbush warlord. Shaft had never met him but he'd seen him around. A gorilla in three-hundred-dollar threads, screened by other gorillas in less-expensive suits, a throwback to the days when booze barons strutted around town flanked by gunmen in tight overcoats. There was something old-fashioned about Mascola, like a Tommy gun in a violin case. He was a crude man with crude methods, the kind of man who would use a bomb to get rid of a rival, or send flower-bearing killers to rub out a widow.

"Thanks for the coffee."

He placed his cup on the table and stood up. He wanted to get out of there. He wanted a long, fast walk to help him think. Part of him wanted Kelly to walk in through the door, just stroll into his fancy pad with a smile on his face so he could blow that smile all over the walls. That would have given him satisfaction, but no answers, no solutions. He started moving out.

"A kiss good-bye?" she asked.

She was following him to the door, almost running to keep up with him.

"No," he said, going out into the hall, "I'm saving that for Kelly."

Kelly made sure, but the longer he searched the casket-display room the more convinced he became. The money was with Cal. It was six feet underground, locked in a bronze vault and guarded by the dead. His first instinct was to run to his car and drive out to the cemetery, grab a shovel and start digging, but he forced himself to remain calm. He had to think, clearly and rationally. Cal hadn't been buried in the middle of the wilderness. The cemetery was a busy place with funerals every hour of the day, and a watchman patrolled the grounds at night. There was no way he could get a disinterment order, not without bringing Arna into it. Just no way at all.

Christ. The money was there but it might just as well have been on the surface of the moon.

"Think," he said out loud.

Maybe he could hire some men . . . two or three guys with strong backs. How long would it take them to dig down to the casket? An hour? Two hours? How often did the cemetery patrol make rounds? He might get away with it, but if he were caught . . .

He dismissed the thought. Robbing the grave wasn't the answer. Cal would have to be disinterred, but without Arna knowing anything about it. How?

"Think."

He could forge Arna's signature on a document requesting that her husband's body be moved. That would clear the way. A court order might not be necessary if he could convince the cemetery directors that the removal was merely temporary. It would be risky, but for half a million dollars he was willing to

chance it. A hundred ideas flashed through his head and he sorted them out on his way back to the office. When he dialed the cemetery he knew what he was going to say, and when he spoke he did so with authority.

"Albert J. Kelly of Asby-Kelly...."

The man he spoke to knew him, and responded warmly, one businessman to another.

"Mrs. Asby is very upset about her husband's burial."

The man at the cemetery was shocked. The organization that he represented guaranteed complete satisfaction. It was a matter of pride and tradition.

Kelly talked smoothly, calming the man, assuring him that there had been nothing wrong with the burial *per se*.

"Mrs. Asby was in a state of shock at the time. Now she wants to do something more . . . well, elaborate. A much larger plot, a marble statue of an angel, a tomb for an important man. You people have taste. I'm sure you know what she has in mind—and money is no object."

He had the man on the hook. Death was a business. "She would like you to start work right away...."

"Of course, Mr. Kelly."

"... a four-plot gravesite, near some trees...."

"We understand, Mr. Kelly."

"I'll arrange for our own hearse to transport the coffin to the new grave."

"Whatever you think best, Mr. Kelly."

Kelly ended the conversation discussing prices on marble statuary. He ordered the best they had, a nine-foot weeping angel carved out of Italian marble. It would cost him a small fortune but it was worth every cent. He felt euphoric when he hung up the

*Shaft's Big Score*

phone. Tilting back in the big leather swivel chair he beamed a smile at the ceiling. He was still smiling when Junior Johnson burst into his office—a disheveled specter on the ragged edge of hysteria.

## 13

Now that almost everybody had one eye on the joint he was rolling and one eye out for the cops, the whole idea of the unmarked police car was so much bullshit. Only a blind man would fail to spot the two-door black Plymouth with a whiplash aerial parked by a hydrant near Shaft's apartment. So Shaft played blind.

"Hey, you," said the man behind the wheel.

Fuck it. He kept walking, hearing the car door slam shut and the sound of footsteps hurrying after him. Shaft had reached the front door of the building when Bollin caught up.

"You deaf?"

"Oh, it's you! Thought for a minute it was the

*Shaft's Big Score*

friendly neighborhood sex pervert we got down here. Sits in a car playing with himself and...."

Shaft opened the front door and Bollin went in with him.

"Whatever you want, we can get at it out of the wind," he said.

There are personalities that come together as smoothly as two scoops of ice cream and others that are stone and flint. This one made sparks.

"Arna Asby. I want to talk to her."

"So talk to her. She'll talk to anybody, far as I know."

"Don't fuck with me, Shaft. I've been up there twice, ringing the bell, knocking on the door."

Shaft laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing," Shaft said, "but she's sitting up there with a .38 in her hand. It'd a been something to see you sticking your head around the corner and her trying to nail you."

"That puts her in prison."

Shaft chuckled.

"Yeah, but think where it puts you."

"Is she up there?" Bollin asked sharply.

"Sure. But it takes a special kind of sweetness—which you ain't got—to make her open the door. Tell you what . . . I'll let you in, and when you've got what you came for you can give me a lift someplace in your shiny new po-leece car."

Bollin looked wary. "Where?"

"I don't know, man," Shaft said. "That's something you are going to tell me."

Shaft showered and got into a dark suit while Bollin and Arna talked in the living room. He could hear

the low rumble of Bollin's voice while he was getting dressed, but when he came out of the bedroom Bollin stopped talking, almost in mid-sentence.

"I want him to know," Arna said. She was seated on the couch, staring fixedly at a slip of paper on the coffee table.

"What's the matter, Arna?" Shaft sat beside her and put an arm around her slim shoulders. She was trembling, reflecting neither shock nor pain, in anger.

"Money," she hissed. "Just for some filthy money."

"That's what most people get killed for," Bollin said quietly.

Arna broke from Shaft's side and ran into the bedroom, slamming the door behind her.

"Don't go after her," Bollin said. "She'll work it out." Shaft glared at him. "What kind of shit did you lay on her?"

Bollin indicated the paper on the table. "Cal Asby's death warrant. Read it."

There wasn't much to read. It was a photostat of a bank withdrawal slip in the amount of five hundred thousand dollars and signed by Calvin Monroe Asby.

"All in cash," Bollin said. "Asby walked out of that bank with a flight bag full of bills and Kelly was right beside him."

Shaft felt in his pockets for a cigarette. "That should give you Kelly by the balls."

Bollin snorted. "It doesn't give us anything. Asby withdrew the money from his own account—the Calvin Monroe Asby Foundation. Kelly can plead ignorance. All we know for certain is that Asby's dead and the money's missing."

Shaft found a crumpled Kent. He lit it and blew a mist of smoke through compressed lips.

"What do you want to do—look in Arna's purse for it?"

"She didn't know anything about it . . . the money or what he was doing with it."

"Yeah, but that won't keep her alive."

"No—and neither will you unless you stay the hell out of this. All you're doing for Mrs. Asby is drawing trouble."

Shaft took an impatient drag on his cigarette and then flipped it into an ashtray. "Okay. Get her into a hotel and put a cop outside her door, because I only got one direction—and that's straight ahead."

They checked Arna into the Sherry-Netherland on Fifth Avenue and got her a view of the skaters in the park. Shaft stayed with her while Bollin went over to the Fifty-fifth Street precinct house to make arrangements for her protection. Her room was on the twelfth floor—clean, brightly lighted and about as comfortable as she could be away from home. Arna barely glanced at it. She went directly to the bed and sank onto it as though her legs had been designed to carry her that far and not a step farther.

"It'll only be for a few days," Shaft said, trying to sound as if he meant it, "then I'll take you home."

"Will you?" she asked softly. "Or will you be dead in a few days?"

"Depends on how you count the days. Live to ninety—that's still only a few days."

"Stay out of it, Johnnie."

"I'm already in." He let the curtains fall into place and turned to face her.

She didn't understand him. Shaft could see the blankness in her eyes, the veil shutting out reality. She had looked at him and seen only death. He

walked over to the bed, opened her purse and took out the snubby gun he had given her. She wouldn't need it. But he would.

"She's a nice lady," Bollin said as he teased the Plymouth into the traffic groping down Lexington. "Too pretty to be a widow. Tough break."

Tough break. Shit. That was probably the extent of the bastard's philosophy. Shaft could imagine Bollin shrugging off any tragedy from a cut finger to a subway fire with those two blunt words.

"Where did you want me to drop you?" Bollin asked.

"Wherever Gus Mascola hangs out," Shaft said tightly.

Bollin sucked at a tooth. "Who?"

Shaft refused to dignify the dumb act.

Bollin was silent for a moment as he listened to the crackle of police calls coming over the radio. "Do you want some advice?"

"Fuck advice."

Bollin chuckled. His laughter had a low, rasping sound like a fingernail drawn across a piece of tin.

"Okay."

"That's my worry."

"And you're welcome to it." Bollin made a left turn on Fifty-ninth Street and headed toward the Queensboro Bridge. "These two punks you wasted belonged to Mascola."

Shaft thought about it. He spent ten seconds glaring out the window.

"So you go after him, then."

"Funny thing about grand juries these days. You gotta prove things. Mascola's a snake who pays other snakes to do things. I know that, and you know that,

*Shaft's Big Score*

but there's nothing to connect Mascola to those guys except street talk—and street talk doesn't hold up in court."

"Fuck advice," Shaft said as unaccustomed as he was to repeating himself.

Jesus, Bollin thought. What did you do with a maniac like this? He turned the radio up louder and headed over the bridge into Queens.

## 14

"This is it." Bollin cut the engine and leaned back in the seat.

Shaft frowned at a dark, deserted street lined with tightly shuttered stores.

"Where the hell are we?"

"Right on the Brooklyn line," Bollin said. "The place you're looking for is around the corner, a little joint called Mother's. Ever hear of it?"

"No."

"Don't get around to the better places do you, Shaft?"

"Got enough in Manhattan. How does this one operate?"

"By staying clean. It's strictly neutral ground where everybody checks his gun and plays it cool."

### *Shaft's Big Score*

"Well, at least you know where they are—which doesn't sound very bright."

"They're not stupid—and they're not polite. You break any house rules, you'll come out in a basket. And there won't be anybody to help you."

Shaft opened the door and stepped out. "Sergeant, there never is."

He could hear the music as he turned the corner. The cool urgent beat of a small combo filtered through the brick walls of a two-story building squeezed between a grocery and a dry-cleaning shop. A tiny neon sign hung above a closed door, the word Mother's a hazy green against the mist. Shaft paused under the sign and looked up and down the street. There were a lot of cars parked along both sides—Cadillacs, Continentals, a couple of Buicks and Chryslers—a beer neighborhood but a champagne crowd. He pushed open the door and walked in like he belonged there.

The music came in dark waves of sound, pulsing and hypnotic. A blue spotlight wavered in the darkness, pinpointing a tiny stage at the far end of a long, narrow room crowded with people at tables. Smoke hung above the crowd in thick gray layers, diffusing the light in a blue glow. Shaft stood in front of a curtained archway and watched the musicians in the tiny circle of the stage, the light sparkling off electric guitars.

"Check your coat?"

He barely heard the voice above the music. A hand tugged at his sleeve and he half-turned to a young, tired blonde who looked more like a go-go dancer than a hatcheck girl and Shaft hesitated, not sure what she was after.

"The coat, Jim." A heavy-set man in a tuxedo ma-

### *Shaft's Big Score*

terialized out of the darkness. He had a sharp, Neapolitan face with thin lips and big, white teeth. He could have been snarling or smiling.

"I'd like a table," Shaft said, raising his voice above the din.

"Sure," the man said, "but give the lady the coat."

He gave her the coat and she slipped a ticket into his hand before stepping back into the cubicle to the right of the door.

The man in the tuxedo held the curtains apart, but blocked the archway with his bulk. His glance at Shaft was brief but thorough.

"Ever been in before?"

"I'm new in town," Shaft said. "Just got in from Detroit."

"Oh, sure—well, enjoy the show."

And up yours, too. Shaft speculated on busting the sonofabitch in the mouth and hanging him up in the coatroom. Maybe the girl would give him another plastic ticket if he lived long enough to drag him there. He felt a dozen pair of eyes walking up and down his body as he followed the tuxedo into the room.

*There won't be anybody to help you.*

The music jolted to a climax, stopped abruptly for a second, and then surged into an intro that brought applause and a tall black man who stepped from behind a red velvet curtain at one side of the stage into the gleam of a spotlight. He raised a languid hand that flashed diamond fire from every finger.

"Hey... Hey...."

The man's voice had the resonant timbre of a steel barrel being struck with a hammer. He walked slowly toward the first line of tables, a mike held in his left hand like a silver baton and began to sing, bringing

the notes up from his toes and letting them roll effortlessly from his lips. He was a black man singing about a black man's world to a roomful of hard-eyed Sicilians and their women, but they dug him.

But Shaft wasn't there for the music. He looked around, maybe for Mascola, but the blue spot and the thick smoke reduced his vision to a few adjoining tables, and beyond that he could see nothing but blurred faces and shadowy forms. Some of the forms were moving, getting up from the tables and crossing to a far corner of the room where a low light shone above a doorway. He watched the shadows go through it. The restrooms? Maybe—maybe not. Shaft lit a cigarette, leaned back to enjoy the performance but kept his eyes on the doorway. Ten people went through it, singly and in groups, before the song ended and the lights went up. Ten people going in, but not one coming out and if the cans were back there they'd be pissing in each other's pockets.

"Hey, brother. You lose your fox in the crowd?"

Shaft looked up to the singer standing in front of him.

"No, man," Shaft said, "just travelin' light tonight. All I need is somebody to get here with a drink."

The singer pointed a long arm toward the bar. The snap of his fingers was like the crack of a pistol.

"A man is on his way. Anything else you need to put it all together?"

"Yeah. I got a hundred dollars says that door near the bar doesn't go to Disneyland."

The singer raised his dark glasses for a second and then let them fall back into place, obscuring the amusement in his eyes.

"No bet, brother. I'm not a gamblin' man."

"I am."

"Then that's your door."

They chuckled together.

"By the way," Shaft said, "who's Mother?"

"They're all mothers around here," the singer said, drifting away.

Shaft sipped his drink and waited. The room was in flux. The musical group had given way to piped-in record music and couples were getting up to dance on the small dance floor, or drifting toward the bar. It was a good time to move casually toward the doorway—just one of the regulars heading for the action.

Shaft stood up with his glass of Scotch in one hand and a cigarette in the other—stood up a little too quickly and bumped heavily into a man behind him. The man fell against a table, catching the edge of it with his hands and sending glasses and ashtrays crashing to the floor.

"Sorry, I . . ." But Shaft's attempted apology died in his throat as he looked into the furious eyes of Albert Kelly.

"Goddamn you!" Kelly shouted. "Stay out of my way!"

Kelly came scrambling up with hands ready to move.

"You can get rid of me, Kelly, with about two minutes of truth."

"I can get rid of you easier than that, you sonofabitch!"

The big, black singer pushed in between them with the skill of a referee.

"Cool it!" he demanded. "This joint's only got one rule—you do your fightin' somewhere else."

Kelly turned quickly and walked. Shaft made no

attempt to go after him, but he would have had to go through the singer to do it anyhow.

"You better sit down, brother."

Shaft shook his head. "My money won't wait."

The man laughed and dropped his hand from Shaft's arm.

"With all the women in the world, how come you got to waste your time on that shit, man?"

"I can't handle all the women in the world," Shaft said, pushing off to rest over a pair of warm dice.

Mascola liked the way they were running. He flipped a hundred-dollar bill on the come line and watched the woman who was shooting. The big broad had held the dice for five minutes and still hadn't made her six. She had a crumpled twenty riding on the six and she was having more fun than a drunk monkey. Lose it or win it, she was making the come bettors rich by hitting every other point on the dice. She rolled a six and Mascola watched his money go to the point line and sit on the six. Now it was his point.

"How'm I doin', sugar?" the woman squealed at no one in particular. She scooped up the dice and threw them with a sloppy, underhand motion.

"Big six again," the dice dealer intoned flatly. "Pay the line."

The broad was too much. Mascola collected his two hundred. She batted her eyelashes at Mascola and threw the dice again.

"Four the hard way," the dealer said. He looked on the verge of tears. There wasn't a number on the line against the railing that wasn't thick with bills.

It was beautiful. Mascola had taken a thousand from the table and there didn't seem to be any end

### *Shaft's Big Score*

in sight. The broad was a natural. She couldn't roll seven. He was peeling off some bills to toss on the line when Kelly pushed up against him and grabbed his hand.

"Something's happening, Gus, we gotta talk."

"Fuck off," Mascola said. "You ain't got the money in your hand."

"I need help, Gus," Kelly said. He hated this ugly greaseball who had him in the clutch of terror.

Mascola watched the dice, ignoring him.

"Gus, for Christ's sake!" Kelly's voice rose in desperation.

"What are you doing here? Have you found the money?"

"No, Gus . . . no . . . but . . ."

Mascola's face hardened. "You're runnin' out of time."

"I'll get the money, Gus. I swear it. I think I know...."

He could have bitten his tongue off. Jesus. That was his life insurance.

Mascola was staring at him shrewdly. "What's the matter with you?"

"Knocks is ripping off my runners." The words came in a gush as he glanced quickly over his shoulder. "Shaft made the first hit, early this morning."

"Shaft? The old friend of the family," he sneered. "You give me a pain in the ass. You should have been on to that. Asby was playing footsie with Knocks all along. Shaft may be a private dick but he's one of Knocks' people. So what else is new?"

"He's *here*. That's what I'm trying to tell you. He's in the other room having a drink!"

Mascola forgot the rattle of the dice and the chant

of the dealers. He was staring at Kelly, but the intensity of his gaze seemed to go clear through him.

"We'll send the sonofabitch back to Knocks with a message," he whispered.

The corridor was narrow and lighted only by a single naked bulb dangling from the ceiling on a twisted cord. There were two closed doors at the far end and a man in a gray suit sitting in front of them, looking at nothing. He had eyes like a dead fish, Shaft thought.

"Yeah?"

"The Police Commissioner sent me."

The guard rolled a cigar stub from one side of his mouth to the other.

"Open the coat, comedian," he said.

Shaft unbuttoned his jacket and held the edges apart. The guard's search was perfunctory—a glance to make sure no shoulder holster dangled under the black man's arm, a pat on both hips and that was that. If he had felt under the waistband in the small of Shaft's back he would have found the .38, but he wouldn't have been happy about finding it. Shaft had steeled himself to take the rent-a-cop out with either hand.

"Okay, bud," the guard said, jerking a thumb toward the door on the left.

Shaft stepped into the darkness of a hallway as the door clicked shut behind him. A faint sliver of light came through a curtain at the end of it and Shaft groped forward. It didn't compare at all with the burst of light that went off in his head when they hit him. That was a chandelier of glistening prisms.

It began with the snap of something leaden against his skull just below his left ear. He spun against the

wall and pressed his hands against it to keep from slipping down into darkness.

Fall and they've got you. You're under their feet if you fall. They can kick out your eyes if you fall. He held on to the wall and kicked into the darkness with his right leg. He felt a wild sense of triumph as his foot connected with bone and he heard a gasp of pain. He twisted his head violently from side to side but the leather-covered saps found him, beating him away from the wall. He didn't feel the floor come up to meet him; he knew only that he was lying against wood and that someone was kneeling close to his head, gripping his hair, tugging his face around.

"You can go back to Knocks now. Go back and tell that nigger he's a dead man if he fucks with me."

Shaft opened his mouth to say something, but the words were noises. He was down and whoever these cocksuckers were they were going to keep him down. He tried to draw up his legs, but he was too late for that. The kicking began, a slow, methodical nailing, workmanlike and precise. Leather trip-hammers slammed into his body and he went out on jagged bolts of pain.

## 15

Knocks Persons sat in the back seat of the Fleetwood, a giant gorilla wrapped in the camouflage of an alpaca overcoat. He stared morosely at the narrow alleys of Brooklyn as Willy steered the big car through them. He felt very much alone despite the presence of Willy and three of his people. He wasn't dead certain that what he was about to do was right. It might screw up his deal with Sharrett. But that had to be risked. Arthur Sharrett could sit on his ass and talk about "exclusive territories." But Knocks had never been given anything. Handing Arthur Sharrett money and getting an "exclusive territory" in return didn't mean shit. A territory was exclusive only if a man had the power to keep other men from grabbing

it. He had Harlem, not through divine right, but because he had taken it.

He shifted his great bulk and stared out the side window. A Brooklyn alley was no better and no worse than a Harlem alley. Maybe not quite as dirty. Maybe not quite as full of junkies, but still an alley. Knocks looked away.

The big car rolled to a stop and Willy cut the lights.

"Is this it?" Knocks asked.

"Mother's back door," Willy said. "How do we play it?"

"We wait," Knocks took a cigar out of his pocket and stuck it in the corner of his mouth. "When he comes out we grab him. I don't want any shooting here. I just want him picked up. Is that clear?"

The others in the car nodded silently. They were lean black men, their faces sharp as hatchets under the narrow brims of their hats.

Knocks chewed on the cigar and looked straight ahead. Sooner or later Gus Mascola would come out the back door and walk right into his hands. Mascola had to die because he was a creeping cancer that had to be cut away before it spread over everything. He wondered if Arthur Sharrett would understand that.

"I don't give a shit if he does or he doesn't," he muttered.

No one else spoke. They sat in the darkness with guns in their hands . . . waiting and watching.

They stood like mourners over the body, swaying a little from a deep satisfying stimulus.

"Throw his ass into the alley and let him crawl back to Harlem," Mascola said.

Shaft didn't hear it. Nor Jerry Longo's whine.

### Shaft's Big Score

"He killed my brother. The black sonofabitch."

"An overdose of stupid pills could've killed your brother. Shut up and do like I say."

Jerry Longo hesitated, then bent down and gripped Shaft by the lapels of his suit and jerked him to his feet. Andy Pascal helped him drag the sagging body to the side door.

"One for the road," Longo whispered, driving his right knee into Shaft's middle. It was wasted fury, Shaft couldn't feel a thing.

Willy stiffened. "Somebody," he said.

"I got eyes," Knocks grumbled.

The alley door opened and what could have been a bundle of old clothes came flying out. The door closed as quickly as it had opened and the bundle stirred on the wet ground.

"They're kinda tough on losers in that joint," Willy said.

Knocks leaned forward and watched intently as the bloody creature crawled to the wall and tried to get to his feet.

"Go get him," he ordered.

Willy fretted. "*That* ain't the man we're after."

"Ain't so sure," Knocks murmured thoughtfully.

"Go."

They went.

It was quiet and restful, a good time to sit and think. Knocks Persons tilted back the leather bathtub he used for a chair and rested his feet on the edge of his glass desk. Willy had fixed a drink and he pulled on it like a rich cigar, keeping an eye on the stain on his leather couch—Shaft. Well, he didn't owe him anything. Shaft had done a job for him once. He was

### *Shaft's Big Score*

grateful, but he had paid the man. It was as simple as that. A man does a job and he gets paid for it. No debts, moral or otherwise, had prompted him to take Shaft out of the alley. If he hadn't felt that Shaft could be useful he would have left him there with the rest of the trash.

"Bring him around," he said.

Willy had been sitting in a chair by the couch for the past hour. He had washed the blood off Shaft's face, put a rip of tape on the torn eyebrow, dabbed Scotch on Shaft's lips and slapped him in the face with a wet rag a couple of times. Nothing. The man was out. Maybe he was dying.

"I think we got a stiff on our hands," Willy said.

"Open his shirt and pour ice water on his chest," Knocks said.

Willy enjoyed this and did it with a smile.

That's what Shaft saw when he opened his eyes. Willy looking down at him with a grin.

Shaft tried to sit up, but bolts of white light exploded behind his eyes and he gripped his skull with both hands to keep it from flying apart.

"Just easy," Knocks said. "You ain't fit to move. Get the man a drink, Willy. We got some talkin' to do."

Willy poured a big drink, half a tumbler of Black Label, and helped Shaft get most of it past the tears in the flesh of his face.

"Mascola does nice work," Knocks said.

Shaft took another swallow. The tide of pain fell; the swell of anger took its place.

"Fuck you."

Knocks snorted. "He let you live—this time. Don't press your luck."

Shaft frowned, trying to remember. His face felt as if it had been put together with a stapling gun.

"He sent you the same message."

"I got the message," Knocks said. "It's been sent before. But you the one better take it. Get your ass out of the city until this whole thing is settled."

"What thing?"

"A little disagreement about who banks the numbers action in a certain section of Queens."

Shaft decided to get up. He moved one muscle and his body told his brain to fuck off with such thoughts. They were for the living, not the residue. He lay back.

"Which one of you assholes killed Asby?"

Knocks smiled. "The way I hear, he just got scratched from the race. Nice cat. But he ain't worth dyin' for, Shaft."

Knocks swung his legs off the desk and leaned forward.

"Puttin' up with you ain't the easiest row to hoe. You may be tough, but Mascola's tougher. Look at you, boy. You can hardly move. What was this cat Asby to you, anyhow?"

"Something you wouldn't know anything about—a friend."

Knocks shook again with hidden laughter. "Okay. He was a friend. He was also a man with a territory—a territory that's now up for grabs."

"How bad do you want it?"

"I'd pay a fair price."

Shaft tried to move again. The pain was there, but the whiskey was winning. He got his feet on the floor.

"I want Cal Asby's killer. And if anything was taken that belonged to him, I want it for his widow."

Knocks thought very quickly. "I can't hand you Asby's killer. Don't know who done it. Could have been Mascola . . . but he ain't the only shark eatin'

### Shaft's Big Score

minnows. He's in business with a white cat name of Arthur Sharrett, big financier . . . lives on Central Park South. Ever hear of him?"

Shaft shook his head. It throbbed. But it also told him Knocks wasn't feeding him information out of the goodness of his heart. There were more angles in it than a stained-glass window of the Battle of Hastings.

"So he has a partner. So what?"

"Didn't say anything about a *partner*, Shaft. I said Mascola was in business, but he don't head it. He takes his orders from Sharrett . . . and that's where he wants to take this territory used to be Asby's."

Knocks paused, took out a fresh linen handkerchief the size of a pillow case and blew his nose. It sounded like an elephant in heat. "Now, if I was lookin' for the cat who had Asby wiped out . . ."

"What's Sharrett to you?"

Knocks stiffened. He truly looked shocked. Even Willy was impressed.

"To me? I just heard talk about him, and I'm passin' that talk on to you."

Knocks was turning into multiple images and Shaft looked away. Just moving his head was an effort.

"Call me a cab."

"Willy, help him down to the street. See he don't trip on the stairs."

"I can find my own way." It was slow and it was hard and it hurt like all the devils in hell were breaking his bones with little brass hammers, but he walked.

"Thanks for the Band-Aid."

"Any time," Knocks said.

## 16

Shaft felt like a ninety-year-old woman who had tried to hitch a ride on the back of a bus in wet sneakers, lost her footing and fallen into the path of at least two cabs. It would go away in two or three weeks if he lay down to wait. That's what the bastards expected. He kept the thought in mind. And it helped as a goad, getting him down the stairs and across the dark lobby to the street.

A cab was waiting at the curb. The black man behind the wheel eyed Shaft with indifference as he limped across the sidewalk and eased himself into the back.

"Where to, brother?"

"Hundred and thirty-sixth."

### *Shaft's Big Score*

"Harlem hospital," the driver said. "Fall off a chair?"

"Bed," Shaft said. "Fell out of bed."

The bored intern in the emergency room patched and stitched in tight-lipped silence. His nights were filled with human wreckage that stumbled, crawled or got carried into the antiseptic glare of his temporary stop on his route to a lucrative specialty, a divorce from the nurse who put him through med school and a good broker.

"Jesus! Take it easy, man."

The doctor paid no attention to Shaft. A cracked rib hurt when it was taped. That was a fact of life over which he had no control. He finished the job of putting Shaft back together and then watched critically as Shaft struggled into his shirt.

"Having trouble using your right arm?"

"Yeah," Shaft muttered.

"It should be in a sling. You have a possible hairline fracture of the humerus."

"I don't want it in a sling," Shaft said through clenched teeth.

The doctor shrugged and turned away. "Suit yourself."

He finished dressing in a mounting rage, ignoring the pain that sliced through him every time he moved his arm. Pain could take a man out or it could feed him. To Shaft, it was the strength he needed to put on his coat and walk out of the hospital. The motherfuckers had given him all the pain he was going to take. They had given him a cracked body and a dead friend. The scales were tipped the wrong way.

"Keep hurting," he said to himself as he pushed

the door open and stepped into the cold dawn of Harlem.

The crapshooters were gone. There was no one fading Mascola as he rolled a pair of dice across the table. He had been throwing the dice for nearly an hour, just snapping them out and scooping them back up again while Kelly stood at the opposite side of the table and watched him uneasily.

"You're going to wear the spots off, Gus," Kelly joked.

Mascola said nothing. Kelly dabbed at his brow with a damp handkerchief and glanced at the far corner of the room where Andy Pascal, Jerry Longo and another man were playing a silent game of cards—dealing them out, looking at them, tossing them back, reshuffling, dealing again. Kelly felt a stir of panic. Everyone in the room seemed to be waiting. But waiting for what?

"I better get home," Kelly said. "I got a funeral first thing in the morning."

Mascola paused in the act of scooping up the dice and glanced at his watch.

"It's only four o'clock. What's your hurry?"

"I told you," Kelly said thickly. "I got this funeral first thing . . . I gotta get *some* sleep."

Mascola picked up the dice and jiggled them in the palm of his hand. "I thought you might've had something to tell me."

Kelly dabbed at his face again. "What?"

"I don't know. Like maybe you'd found the money—or something."

Kelly tried to smile, but he couldn't get his facial muscles to work. Mascola was staring at him and the card players had stopped looking at their cards.

"For Christ's sake, Gus, if I'd found the bread I'd have told you hours ago."

"Or maybe you know where to find it."

Kelly tried to look back at the hard, dark eyes, scowling pools of evil.

"Sure," Mascola said, "you wouldn't stall me . . . and I won't stall you. That's how it should be with partners. No stalling around. I'm giving you twelve hours, Kelly. If you don't come through by then our deal is finished—and so are you."

Kelly gripped the edge of the table with both hands. "If you kill me before I find it, you'll never get that money."

Mascola let the dice roll off his palm. They bounced on the table and came up seven.

"Watching you go to hell may be worth five hundred grand. But we won't know until this afternoon, will we?"

"Gus, I swear to you . . ."

"You got it wrong, Kelly," Mascola said. "A man in your spot shouldn't swear. He should pray."

Kelly turned away, walked stiffly and stared straight ahead. Mascola watched him go in anger and contempt, then picked up the dice and hurled them savagely across the room.

"Andy! Don't let the sonofabitch out of your sight."

Pascal pushed back his chair and stood up.

"You think he'll pull a cross on you?"

"I think the cocksucker knows. If he gets his hands on the bread, blow his brains out."

Pascal smiled and left the room as silently as a wise man leaves a greedy mistress.

The right man for the job, Mascola was thinking. Andy Pascal could trail like a shadow and strike like a snake. Maybe everything would work out . . . the

money . . . the trouble with Knocks . . . everything. He almost felt good, relaxed.

"Hey," he called out, "one of you jokers fix a drink."

Knocks could get a cab by picking up the phone. Hell, Shaft thought, Knocks could get anything from a hired killer to a carload of pussy by just picking up the phone. When Knocks spoke, Harlem listened. Shaft was not Knocks. He was only a tall, mean-looking spade in a dirty, bloodstained suit standing on a corner. There wasn't one cabdriver in the city who would have stopped to pick him up. A few slowed just enough to get a good look at him. None of them had liked what they saw. So it was down under Lenox Avenue to the subway, past the twitching drunks and junkies who weren't lucky enough to be in jail. Shaft fought the urge to flake out on a bench until the train came. Shit, there were kids prowling the stations who could strip a man down to the bones in ten seconds. Even a bloodstained suit would fetch a price somewhere. He stayed on his feet, pacing the length of the platform, watched nervously by a few elderly janitors on their way to a day of scrubbing floors. They looked at him with eyes of stone. They were lifers in the prison of the city. They all rode the same train through life, he thought, we all do.

Then it came, with a seat against the motorman's cab where he could half-sprawl and half-doze to Sheridan Square. Like the rest of them dozing on this red-eye special, he was going to work.

A shower, clean clothes, two cups of coffee, a can of peaches eaten with a spoon. Shaft drank the nectar out of the can, chased the syrupy sweetness with cof-

fee and watched the sun struggle to break through the overcast. It was going to be another ball-freezing day. He finished his coffee, lit a cigarette and went into the living room. He dragged out the Manhattan directory from the shelf above his desk and thumbed through it. There were a couple of A. Sharretts. One was a plumbing-supply company and the other was an address in Peter Cooper Village. A private detective was only as good as the sum total of his sources of information. Shaft had his friends and they were in the right places. He knew a tight-assed little fox who grooved every weekend at the No Name, but who was Miss Efficiency for the telephone company Monday through Friday. She'd be in by eight o'clock and she'd give him Sharrett's phone number and address even if it was the best-kept secret in the city. There was half an hour to kill. Shaft went into the bedroom and got the very last gun—the .380 automatic. He held the gun all right and swung it up from his pocket despite the grinding pain in his arm, but he was too slow. And maybe he could hit the side of the Pan Am building from ten feet and then maybe he couldn't. He aimed at the doorknob of his closet. The front sight wobbled all over the room. In a crowded room he'd get eight innocent bystanders and a window before. . . .

Fuck it. He dropped it in his pocket.

Eight o'clock.

"Linda? John Shaft. You even smell good on the phone."

He got two numbers and an address for his bullshit. There had been an Arthur Sharrett and a Gail Sharrett with separate unlisted numbers. He wondered if Gail Sharrett was Arthur's wife.

He wasn't Knocks Persons, but then it wasn't neces-

### *Shaft's Big Score*

sary to have pull to get a cab at eight o'clock in the morning in the West Village. They came pouring up Sixth and Eighth Avenues in clusters, squadrons, heading for Midtown and a day of fighting for a share of the dirt and the dollar. Shaft got a rail-thin kid with an Afro as big as a cement scoop.

"Morning."

"Where'll it be?"

"The nearest hockshop. No, make it that big one over at Sixth and Houston."

"Was you in that game, too?"

The pawnshop was a barometer of the economic condition in Greenwich Village. The myriad number of electric guitars, amplifiers, drum sets, trumpets and saxophones said the amateur noisemakers who called themselves musicians were having a rotten time that winter. A dignified white-haired man in a double-breasted blue suit greeted Shaft's entrance with a smile. Shaft wasn't carrying anything. He just had to be a buyer.

"I'm looking for a shotgun," Shaft said.

The man stopped smiling but it didn't interfere with business.

Shaft bought a twelve-gauge Remington pump. The man wrapped the gun in brown paper and warned Shaft to make sure that his hunting license was valid.

Shaft and the gun got back into the kid's cab without comment about the big bulky package.

"Who do you know with a bench vise and some tools I could use?"

The driver thought a moment. "A buddy of mine runs a gas station over on Canal Street. He might let you use the shop if you can spare a five."

Five it was. For another ten he could have bought

the business. The small garage behind the two battered gas pumps was littered with the carcasses of automobiles and the stripped shell of an ancient bus. But there was a vise on a bench and a wooden drawer filled with assorted tools, including a hacksaw and some files. Shaft slipped the shotgun out of its wrappings and clamped it in the vise. He sawed the barrel off at the forearm and smoothed the cut with a file. Then he sawed off the walnut stock leaving only the pistol grip. What he had left was a chopped-down weapon that violated about nine laws, but couldn't miss, would hide under a coat and would work very quickly. All he had to do was point it in the general direction of a target and he was sure to hit. The charge of shot coming from a sawed-off barrel would erupt in a wide spray of lead.

It was all done by the time the kid with the cab earned his twenty and came back with the box of shells, five of which went into the gun and several more of which Shaft dropped into his pockets.

He felt dressed for the party that was soon to come.

Andy Pascal watched the dawn come up through the windshield of his car. He paid no attention to it. His gaze rested on a second-story window of the Asby-Kelly funeral home where a light still burned. Pascal had trailed Kelly to the home, watched him park in front and let himself into the building. A few moments later the light had gone on. Pascal could only speculate about what Kelly was doing up there, but he had to come out sooner or later, and if he was carrying anything—anything at all—Pascal was prepared to take it away. Along with Kelly's life. The diamond-back Colt with a silencer screwed into the barrel was under the seat within easy reach.

Kelly emerged at seven-thirty, empty-handed, and walked quickly to the funeral-home parking lot and got into the hearse.

Pascal frowned as he watched Kelly back the hearse around and drive off. He had overheard him telling Mascola that he had a funeral in the morning. But a funeral without a corpse? Pascal started the car and waited until Kelly was a block and a half ahead before following after him. The traffic was light and he didn't want the bastard to spot him. It was a short ride, up Myrtle Avenue and then right on Cypress Hills to the cemeteries that stretched for a mile on both sides of the road. Kelly turned the hearse into one of them, through wrought-iron gates and up a narrow asphalt drive. Pascal slowed down and watched the hearse until it was lost to his view over the crest of a low hill.

So he was going to a graveyard—with a hearse. There wasn't anything strange about that as far as Pascal could figure out. But Mascola had said to tail the man—all the way. He swung the car into the cemetery and drove at a sedate speed past long rows of stone markers. When he topped the crest of the hill he spotted the hearse parked behind a yellow pickup truck. Kelly was standing twenty yards from the road talking to two men with shovels. They were to dig a grave!

"The hell they are," Pascal muttered to himself. He backed the car out of view and cut the engine. He got out of the car and walked back up the hill, crouched low, working his way as close to the three men as possible. He could hear snatches of conversation, but nothing that meant anything. Kelly was giving them directions of some kind. But it didn't matter. When one of the workmen moved from in front of

### *Shaft's Big Score*

the tombstone, Pascal could read the inscription on it: CALVIN MONROE ASBY.

Gus Mascola listened with cold calm to Pascal's call. He couldn't help but feel a twinge of admiration for Kelly. He hadn't believed the black sonofabitch capable of that kind of thinking. Six feet under. Down in the cold, cold ground. The last goddamn place on earth anyone would have thought to look.

"Get back up there," he said into the phone, "but make sure nobody sees you."

How long would it take to dig up the grave and get the coffin out? Mascola had no idea. A couple of hours at least, maybe more if the ground was frozen. Then he'd have his hands on the money. Five hundred thousand dollars in hard cash. Buying power.

Gus Mascola remembered how the old man had leaned forward in his wheel chair and hissed those words at him. *Money talks.* He had the money—or as good as had it—and he wanted him to know about it. He wanted to change those five hundred thousand dollars into nickels and ram them down the old bastard's throat.

Shaft figured his chances of getting into Sharrett's apartment house as zero. He had the cabdriver drive past the building three times and each journey only increased his doubt. All of the big residential buildings facing Central Park were guarded like forts, and Sharrett's place would be no exception. The doorman standing in the lobby wasn't an old-age pensioner. He was six feet three inches of hard-eyed whitey who probably had a pistol in the pocket of his fancy red coat and who wouldn't be overjoyed at the sight of a

### *Shaft's Big Score*

black man strolling into his building with a shotgun in his hand.

Only two classes of people went into a place like that without any trouble—those who lived there, or looked as if they could if they wanted to, and the faceless ones. One of the faceless ones was going into the lobby as the taxi made its third slow swing past the building, a delivery man with a box of groceries. Shaft watched the man breeze past the doorman and stand waiting for the elevator.

Shaft leaned back in the seat and thought it over. Okay, he reasoned, the doorman might have known that particular delivery man on sight, but the principle was sound. It was basic to the city. Any poor son-ofabitch who hauled other people's crap around was damn near invisible. He was just the "boy" from Bergdorf's, or the "kid" from the drugstore. It was even more apparent if the "boy" was black. But what the hell was he going to haul? And to whom? He didn't know for sure if this Sharrett was even there. Shit. He was running blind. He needed time to think it over clearly. He might get only one chance to get at Sharrett and he didn't like the idea of screwing it up.

"Swing over to Lexington. Hotel Baxter."

"You're the man," the driver said.

"And wait for me. I don't want to hustle for cabs today."

"You wanna pay as you go, sport?"

"No," Shaft said, "I want you to have something to look forward to in your old age."

There was no question of Gus Mascola getting into the building. His car was a familiar sight to the doorman who hurried out of the lobby to greet it before

Jerry Longo had pulled the big limousine over to the curb.

"Good morning, Mr. Mascola."

Mascola grunted and pulled across the sidewalk and into the apartment house. He was a man in a hurry and he didn't care who knew it. He fidgeted in the elevator going up to the penthouse and he leaned impatiently on the doorbell until Gail Sharrett opened the door. She wasn't happy to see him.

"You might call before you drop in." Her tone was icy.

Mascola leered at her. She was wearing a pale green peignoir that complemented her eyes and revealed the soft contours of her body. She'd get hers, too.

"Just tell your old man I'm here." Mascola brushed past her, letting one hand slide across her hip as he did so. She jerked away, startled.

"A little early in the morning for that, isn't it?"

"You'll never know until you try it."

She turned her back on him and walked quickly down the hall toward the study. Mascola watched her, a grin on his face. Bouncy, bouncy, bouncy. When it came time he thought maybe he'd fuck her on the dice table at Mother's with her naked ass on the come line....

"Father will see you now, Mr. Mascola."

When it came time.

Arthur Sharrett had been up since 5:00 A.M. Sleep was not a pleasure for him and he rarely slept later. He enjoyed the early hours with the city still slumbering at his feet. It was a good time to think. And he would work at his desk until nine. The intrusion of Gus Mascola on his routine was not welcome.

### *Shaft's Big Score*

"Ten minutes before nine," he snapped, looking at his watch.

"So what?" Mascola walked over to the desk and sat on the edge of it. "I dropped in to take you for a little ride in the country. A beautiful day, Arthur. A man like you should get out more. Get fresh air in his lungs."

Sharrett eyed him coldly. He thought of the derringer in the desk and decided that it would be a foolish move.

"I don't want to go for a ride."

"Now, Arthur. You're just saying that out of habit. You're turning into a recluse. How do you expect to know what's going on in the world if you don't get out of the house once in a while?"

"I know what's going on," Sharrett snapped.

Mascola's expression hardened as he stepped away from the desk. "No you don't, Arthur. You don't know a lot of things. You don't know me. You brought that black bastard into the group just to push me out. I could get very nasty about that, Arthur, but I'm not. I've seen how you run your business and I want you to see how I run mine. I'm buying myself in just as we planned, Arthur. I'm going to put every dime right in your hand so there'll be no question about it."

"You can bring the money here."

Mascola shook his head. "That isn't the way I want to do it."

He walked around the desk and stopped behind the wheelchair. Sharrett made an attempt to swing away, but Mascola gripped the handles on the back and pushed the chair toward the door.

"You gotta trust me, Arthur. It ain't every day in the week I hand out five hundred thousand bucks. Let me do it my way."

### *Shaft's Big Score*

Gail came into the hall as Mascola was getting her father's overcoat out of the closet. She wasn't overjoyed to see it.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm taking your father for a drive," Mascola replied pleasantly. "Want to come, too?"

"No," she snapped. "Where are you taking him?"

Mascola rolled his eyes upward. "To a cemetery. Would you believe it? An old friend died. We wanna visit the grave."

He was mocking her.

"You're lying."

"Gaill" Sharrett's voice was like a slap. "Gus and I have business to do. Stay out of it."

"That's right, Gail," Mascola said quietly. "We've got half a million reasons for this little drive. I'm going to make your father happy. So happy he might just let me take you out tonight to celebrate. How about it, Arthur?"

Sharrett stared fixedly ahead. "Gail might enjoy that."

Mascola looked at Gail and smiled. Right on the crap table . . . some of the boys watching. . . .

Arna was still in bed but she wasn't asleep. She looked hollow-eyed and gaunt. A woman hanging on by her fingertips. When Shaft phoned her from the lobby she nearly broke down.

"Oh, John," she wailed, "I've been so scared!"

She sounded like a little girl afraid of the dark. But when Shaft came into the room she pressed against him like a woman.

Her body was warm from the bed and the heat of her flowed into Shaft's blood like Scotch. He ran a

hand down her back, tracing her spine, as she strained against him.

"Oh, God," she whispered fiercely, "I kept thinking of you dead."

She looked up at his face, noticing for the first time the band of white tape over his eyebrow and the bruised swelling of his lips.

Shaft forced a vague smile. "I walked into a door."

"No," she said sharply. "You've been hurt because of me. Oh, my God, Johnnie, stay out of it. Let the police do it."

"They couldn't make it in a hundred years. They know it and I know it. You have to face facts, baby. It was a mob killing, a rubout. The cops don't solve those cases. They just write them down in a book."

She was staring at him with haunted eyes. "Please! Listen to me, Johnnie. I want you to forget about Cal. I want you to stay alive."

He touched her gently on the cheek. "Thanks, baby, but somebody's walking around with money that has Cal's blood on it. I can't let them get away with it. Not a dime. Nothing."

She clutched him around the waist and pressed her face against his shoulder. "They can have the money. It's filth."

"No, Arna. It's only money—and it belongs to you. Do whatever you want with it. Give it away, burn it, it doesn't matter."

"Stay here, Johnnie. Stay with me." She was whispering against him, her fingers toying with the buttons on his shirt, opening them. Her hand slid across the hard surface of his chest. "Stay with me."

She was right and Shaft knew it. It was the best way. The easy way. She didn't give a damn about the money and she wasn't hellbent for revenge. She

believed in the flag, apple pie and the smooth functioning of law and order. The police would get whoever killed Cal—someday—sometime. Shaft knew better. So did Bollin. So did Mascola and every hood in the city. The killers of Cal Asby were laughing all the way to the bank.

"Stay, Johnny . . . stay. . . ." Her fingers encountered the wide swath of tape across his ribs. Shaft could feel her stiffen, hear the sharp intake of breath. "I don't want them to hurt you any more."

Hell, no. Shaft didn't want to be hurt, either. He wanted to toss his paper-wrapped shotgun out the window. He wanted to have both hands free and use them to carry Arna to the bed.

"I'm sorry, Arna. This is my fight and I can't back out of it. If I did I wouldn't be any use to anybody—ever. Now, I don't want you to ask questions—I just want you to trust me."

She was staring at him blankly. There had been a good reason why she had married the solid and dependable Cal. She wouldn't understand John Shaft if she lived to be a thousand.

"I want you to ring room service," Shaft continued. "Tell them your dress needs pressing and that you want it done as fast as possible. Then I'll give you a number to call. Ask for Arthur Sharrett. Play it cool and crisp. Pretend you're with a brokerage house, Merrill Lynch, and you're inviting him to a seminar on—oh, new trends in the market."

"Johnnie! What are you up to?"

"No questions, Arna. Please do as I ask."

She was bewildered, but she did what he wanted. She sent her dress out and she phoned Sharrett. Shaft paced the room as she talked.

"Mr. Sharrett isn't home," she said dazedly as she

hung up the phone. "She expects him back soon, but doesn't think he'd be interested."

"Who's *she*?"

"His daughter."

Shaft lit a cigarette and resumed his pacing. So Gail Sharrett was a daughter and not a wife. Arthur Sharrett was out, but would be back soon. The information was meager. It was so meager, it was pitiful. The only thing he knew for sure was that at least one person was in the Sharrett apartment. Well, that was something. It meant there was someone to open the door for him.

A porter brought back the dress twenty minutes after it had been picked up. It was on a wire hanger and cased in a plastic bag with a ticket stapled to it. A very efficient hotel laundry, Shaft mused as he looked at it. Just like the real thing.

"What do you think you're going to do with my dress?" There was a slight edge of irritation to Arna's voice now.

"It's my passport," Shaft said as he strode toward the door. "I have to get past a guy in a red coat."

Arna sat down heavily on the bed. "I think I'm going crazy," she said.

## 17

The meter was ticking away feverishly, but the driver seemed oblivious to its music. He was stretched out on the front seat engrossed in a legal textbook.

"Let's move it," Shaft said as he climbed into the back.

"Where to now?" He seemed reluctant to interrupt his studies.

"The place we just left—and hustle."

The driver hustled as much as the traffic permitted. Shaft could have beaten his time hopping on one leg.

"You going to get out this time?" the driver asked.

"Yeah, but don't pull up in front. Go down the block a ways, and give me your jacket."

The kid turned his head sharply, almost ramming

the back end of a bus as he took his eyes off the road. "Give you my *what*?"

"Your jacket, man. I gotta look poor but proud. I want your jacket and you can have mine—for security. If you're worried about it, there's twenty dollars in mad money in the second little flap pocket on the right side."

"I'm not worried about it," the driver said slowly. "I just don't know where to get pants to match."

Shaft sighed. "It's like I was just telling another party—that's your problem."

The jacket was too short in the sleeves and hit Shaft about three inches above the waistline. It was a really crummy jacket, just the kind of jacket the "boy" from the dry cleaners might wear. Shaft hoped the doorman would keep his eyes on the jacket. He breezed into the building, whistling. Just a happy black coming in out of the cold.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?" The doorman was even bigger than he had looked. He had the scarred, embittered face of an ex-cop.

Shaft dangled the dress in front of him, keeping it low to obscure his shoes.

"Mornin'," he drawled. "Got some rush dry cleanin' for a Miss Sharrett."

"Leave it. I'll have it sent up."

Shaft clenched his hand on the shotgun behind the dress.

He bluffed. "I dunno. See, they told me to show her the spot. Know what I mean?"

"Spot?" The doorman was frowning.

"Yeah. They didn't get the spot out 'cause they didn't know what it was. I'm to ask her. If it's gravy she's in good shape. But if it's blood, or tomato juice,

### *Shaft's Big Score*

well, we got to know for sure. You don't fool around with spots."

"Yeah," the doorman muttered, waving a hand toward the elevator. "Go on up."

Shaft squinted at the ticket. "Says Miss Gail Sharrett, but don't say what floor."

"Penthouse," the doorman snapped. A Rolls-Royce was docking in front and the man was out the door before it stopped rolling.

Shaft removed the gun on the elevator, unwrapped it and tossed the torn paper into one corner. He held the gun in his left hand and the dress in his right when he rang the bell of Sharrett's apartment. The door opened a mere crack, but it was more than enough. Shaft butted against it and the door flew inward, slapping Gail Sharrett to the floor.

"Don't scream." Shaft held the gun on her as he stepped into the hall and closed the door behind him.

"What do you want?"

Gail was sprawled on the carpet with her frothy green peignoir riding up marble-white thighs. She was alone in her apartment with a gun-toting black man, but there wasn't a trace of fear in her eyes.

"Girl Scout cookies," Shaft said. "I want to hit your father for a couple boxes."

Gail sat up rubbing one shoulder. "You just missed him, but if you want money maybe I can . . ."

Shaft tossed the dress onto a chair and moved warily down the hall holding the gun in front of him.

"Unless you got five hundred thousand in the stash, I'm not interested."

Gail rose slowly to her feet and smoothed her hair with the palms of both hands. "Everybody has half a million on the brain this morning."

Shaft paused at the end of the hall and looked back at her.

"Like who else?"

Her laugh was short and hollow. "As if you didn't know."

"Maybe I'm stupid."

She eyed him with a cool detachment. "And maybe you're just trained that way. Why don't you go back to Harlem and tell your Mr. Persons that I don't appreciate the way he plays games."

Knocks was black. All grass is green.

"Mr. who?"

"Then you're another fly around the honey pot."

Shaft walked slowly up to her and pressed the muzzle of the shotgun against her belly.

"Talk straight. I never was much for riddles."

She touched the barrel idly with the tips of her fingers.

"Mmmmmmmmm. You have a big gun, don't you?"

Her smile was provocative—or mocking. Shaft couldn't tell.

"Look, baby, we're just running out of time. I've got a mouth full of questions I need answers for."

"Then take that gun away. I'm not one of your gangster friends."

Shaft lowered the gun and Gail flounced past him.

"Come on," she said. "If you're going to grill me we might as well get comfortable."

Shaft followed her down the hall and into the spacious living room. There was a terrace garden at one end behind sliding glass doors, and the walls of the room had more paintings than the Guggenheim Museum. Shaft was impressed. Whatever Arthur Sharrett did for a living, it certainly paid.

Gail sat on a couch and stretched her arms languidly. "Do you know how to make a Bloody Mary? The bar's at the end of the room. You can't miss it."

"Later." Shaft stood facing her, the gun against his leg and pointed at the floor. "You seem to know a lot about a certain five hundred grand."

She looked away from him and toyed with a cushion. "Half a million is an easy number to remember."

"How well can you remember names?"

"I doubt if we know anyone in common."

"Calvin Monroe Asby—for starters."

"Never heard of him."

"Gus Mascola."

That brought her head around. Shaft could see the cold glints of anger in her eyes.

"Okay," Shaft said, "it looks like we run with the same crowd after all."

"What made you think you'd find that pig here?"

"He's in business with your old man."

She glared at him, then picked up the cushion and tossed it to the other end of the couch. "A minor employee with delusions of grandeur. Father gave him a chance to . . . to buy into the firm, but he had a little trouble finding the capital."

"Until Asby died."

"I don't know any Asby," she said sulkily.

No, thought Shaft, she wouldn't have known him. Neither would her father, more than likely. Cal was strictly Mascola's ticket to the big-time carnival of crime, set up by Kelly.

"When did Mascola set this deal with your father?"

"Any minute now." There was no disguising the bitterness in her voice.

Shaft tapped the gun restlessly against his thigh.

"You don't sound very happy about it. What have you got against the man?"

"I wish I had a knife against his throat."

Shaft smiled and touched the tape over his eye-brow. "That gives us something else in common. If Mascola's buying his way in, he's found what I'm looking for. Where's this all taking place? His office? Your father's?"

She took her time answering. "I don't know."

The gun went *slap slap slap* against his leg. "Come on, baby. You can do better than that."

"I tell you I don't know." Her voice was shrill. "Mascola took my father for a drive. He mentioned something about visiting an old friend's grave."

Jesus! A light exploded in Shaft's brain. It was just like that, a brilliant incandescent flash. He saw that monstrous casket being lowered into the ground, the pale sun glinting on the polished bronze. There had been enough room in that casket for three Cal Asbys—and five hundred thousand dollars.

"Get some clothes on. We're going for a ride, too."

"I'm not going anywhere."

Shaft grinned evilly. "You sure aren't staying here, doll. You're coming even if I have to carry you."

She rose from the couch like a spring uncoiling. She was a woman who would be hell to cross. Shaft could sense that much about her and he stepped prudently to one side as she stormed out of the room. But he trailed after her.

"This is my bedroom. Do you mind?" Her tone was a hundred degrees below zero.

Shaft leaned against the doorjamb. "Go right ahead. Forget I'm even here."

She sneered at him. "Is that how you get your kicks, watching women get dressed?"

### *Shaft's Big Score*

Shaft nodded. "It's a hangup, but harmless."

She ripped off her peignoir and faced him, hands on her hips, breasts swaying slightly.

"I'm kind of in a hurry right now if it's all the same to you," Shaft said.

"You bastard!"

She turned away from him in a taut line of fury and walked over to a closet to get her clothes.

Shaft looked on in regret. Some of his friends said you can't fuck 'em all. Could they be right?

Arthur Sharrett felt a deep sense of humiliation. Having to be lifted into the car by Mascola's driver as part of it—he detested the public display of his infirmity. But what pained him most was the realization that he had underestimated Mascola. Somehow, Mascola had emerged as the biggest shark of the bunch. Sharrett had built his organization on brains, but this thug from Brooklyn was showing him the power of muscle.

"Cheer up, Arthur," Mascola said. "It ain't every ride to the cemetery is as happy as this one."

"I don't like this," Sharrett muttered darkly. "I don't like anything about it."

Mascola toyed with a cigar, rolling it between his blunt fingers.

"Now, Arthur, you put people in bad spots and then you get upset if they figure a way out of them. You put me in a bad spot, Arthur. You pushed me right up against the wall . . . You threw Knocks Persons at my throat and hoped I'd roll over and play dead. Only I ain't doin' it."

"So it appears," Sharrett said wryly.

"And one other thing, Arthur. From here on in we start runnin' things my way."

### *Shaft's Big Score*

Sharrett's laugh was a barely audible cackle. "You expect a lot for a measly half million."

"Oh, it ain't the money, Arthur. You could get more money from Knocks. It's the *force*. I got guts, Arthur. I know how to grab. I dig my fingers in the balls and hang on. I'm not a smooth operator like the others. I like to gamble, but I'm not a gambler."

Arthur Sharrett smiled his ghostly smile, his skull-like grin.

"And just what are you, Augustas?"

"A killer. That's right, Arthur—a killer. If people get in your way, or in Persons' way, you maneuver around 'em. You guys try to outthink guys. Me, I just kill 'em. And I don't have to kill more'n a couple before the message gets passed—Gus Mascola will kick your ass up your throat. You want territories, Arthur? I'll give you territories. I'll give you more than you know what to do with."

Sharrett was silent for a moment. The streets of the city flashed past the window, but Sharrett didn't notice them. His mind was on larger canvases, more imposing vistas.

"And what will it cost me?"

Mascola scowled at the cigar as though he had just discovered a flaw in the wrapping.

"Cost? Far as I know, the usual partnership works out to fifty percent—with maybe a small fringe benefit tossed in. Nothing special. Nothing that'd hurt you in the wallet."

Sharrett sighed and continued to look out the window. How dreary it all was. The endless rows of shabby houses, the sullen, gray shapes scurrying toward buses and trains. There was nothing more terrible than poverty and neglect.

## 18

Pete Bollin had an ear. He could hear the cadence of the city the way conductors heard orchestras. There was something discordant in what he was hearing: false notes, sour tunes.

He hit the street looking for answers. The after-hour joints, the obscure alleys where informers waited, hunched against the cold, hoping to sell whatever they had heard during the night. Bollin cruised and handed out a dollar here and a dollar there. The information came to him in scraps, like a torn-up newspaper that he had to put together again. By the time the first gray light of morning filtered through the mist, Detective Sergeant Bollin knew the picture. The Asby-Kelly runners were scared; they were backing out of the game. A vacuum existed in the numbers.

play and others were expected to come in and fill it.  
Who?

Bollin prowled, looking for faces that didn't belong.

A whip-thin black man crossed Northern Boulevard against a traffic light, dodging cars like a matador. Bollin had to brake quickly to keep from slamming into him. The man spun neatly on his heels and sidled up to the window. Bollin rolled it down and the man thrust head and shoulders through the opening.

"I got a little piece a stuff, man, like maybe worth ten bills."

"Get outa the road before you get killed," Bollin growled. He drove the car over to the curb and the man followed right along with it, his hands clutching the edge of the window. The man was a junkie, but in his rare moments of lucidity he was one of Bollin's best informers. He moved so many places to get his smack.

"What's worth ten bucks?"

"I seen 'em," the man said smugly, "with my own eyes."

"Seen what? Green giraffes?"

"Knocks, man. Knocks and a whole *army*."

Bollin pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and took one with exaggerated slowness. The junkie hopped from one leg to another in an agony of impatience. He couldn't stand still for a second.

"So you saw Knocks. So what?"

The junkie chewed his bottom lip and rubbed phantom spiders off his face.

"Don't jive me, man. I told you I seen Knocks—on *this* side of the river. Man, that just gotta mean somethin'."

"It means five bucks," Bollin said as he reached for a book of matches on the dashboard ledge.

The junkie thought about it, twisting one leg over the other like a little kid.

"Okay, man. Five bucks—and another five on it or I'll forget where I saw him."

Bollin sighed and got out his wallet. There was no way on earth a man could outfox a shit shooter.

Knocks was as easy to find as a whale in a bathtub. The moment Bollin turned off Northern onto Seventy-third Street he could see the cavalcade of Cadillacs parked nose to tail. There were four of them, each one containing four men. When Knocks ventured out, he did so in style. No crowding. He was not the kind of man who bussed anyone. Bollin pulled up in front of the lead car, cut the engine, got out and walked back—taking his own good time.

"Good morning, Knocks."

Knocks blew a gentle stream of cigar smoke through the side window into the Sergeant's face.

"Morning, brother Bollin."

Bollin smiled pleasantly and blew smoke right back into the car.

"What brings you over the bridge, brother? Things a little slow in Harlem this morning?"

Knocks tapped cigar ash into the street. Some of it drifted onto Bollin's shoes.

"Things been just fine since you left the beat."

"I've got a new one," Bollin said dryly, "and you're on it."

Knocks looked at Willy who was seated beside him. "You hear that, Willy? I told you brother Bollin wasn't on relief. He's got himself a nice new job."

Willy started to grin, but thought better of it. There

was a look in Bollin's eyes that would have given any man pause.

"One of these days, Knocks, I'm going to have your ass."

Knocks drew calmly on his cigar.

Bollin walked back to his car. He sat rigidly for a few moments to let his anger cool, then flipped on the radio and put in a call for some squad cars. He wanted four Cadillacs checked over, bumper to bumper. He wanted the lead car tagged for being parked in a yellow zone. He wanted the registrations checked . . . equipment . . . licenses—the works. When he hung up the phone, he felt better. He lit another cigarette and glanced in the rear-view mirror. The cars gleamed with polish and chrome. The men inside them were dark shadows, waiting shadows.

But what the hell were they waiting for? Bollin tapped the rim of the steering wheel in frustration. The territory was wide open. The Asby-Kelly runners were afraid to show their faces and Knocks was waiting in the wings. *Waiting*, Bollin thought angrily. He didn't have all the strings tied yet.

Bollin took the receiver off its cradle and called into the station.

"Bollin," he said crisply. "Anything going on?"

It took a moment for the dispatcher to reply. "Like what, Sergeant?"

"I don't know. Any damn thing at all."

"It's pretty quiet. Couple of traffic squawks—and a kid tried to heist a liquor store on Woodside. Not much else."

Bollin chewed at his top lip. "Okay, but keep me posted. If you hear even a whisper about a rumble, any kind of rumble, you let me know."

"Sure, Sergeant—sure."

Bollin hung up and stared into the mirror. Three squad cars were turning off Northern. He had Knocks fenced in, but it wasn't Knocks he was worried about. He thought of cruising over to the Asby-Kelly Funeral Home, maybe have another talk with Kelly, but he talked himself out of it. Hell, he couldn't run around like a chicken without a head. He had to sweat it, just wait for other people to make their moves.

"My car or yours?" Gail Sharrett asked coldly as they waited for the elevator.

"Mine's yellow," Shaft said, "with a build-in meter."

"Then we'll take mine."

To hell with her. She needed her ass kicked, but someone else could do it—someone with sharp, pointy feet.

When they stepped into the elevator, Shaft removed his jacket and wrapped it around the shotgun.

"I can still see it," Gail said smugly. "You're not very good at this sort of thing, are you?"

"I'm still learning." He held the bundle in the crook of his left arm, the barrel pointed at the girl's face. "I'm also very nervous, so don't talk so much."

She compressed her lips and stared straight ahead. She didn't even say anything to the parking attendant when they reached the basement garage. The kid glanced at her, then sprinted away into the shadows.

"I'll drive," Shaft said, "whatever it is."

It was a flame-red Ferrari, purring like a cat. The parking attendant got out with reluctance, held the door open for Gail and gave Shaft cold courtesy.

"Try not to hurt it," Gail said as she watched Shaft ease into low.

She was the world's leading put-down artist. Shaft

changed his mind about wanting to see her kicked. He hoped for worse. He floored the gas pedal, teased out the clutch and the powerful 365GT screamed toward the exit ramp like a navy jet leaving a carrier.

Kelly shuddered in the wind as he paced back and forth between the headstones. The two gravediggers were working with a slowness that seemed almost deliberate. They might as well have been digging with teaspoons for all the dirt they were bringing up with their large pointed shovels.

"Can't you dig a little faster, for Christ's sake?"

Both men paused, waist-deep in a hole. The eldest of the two spat into the pile of dirt neatly stacked by the side of the hole.

"We know what we're doing. You gotta keep the sides straight or you won't get the casket out. You want it out, don't you?"

"I want it out today, not next week."

"Keep your pants on," the gravedigger muttered sourly, "or come dig it yourself."

Kelly swallowed his anger and walked over to the hearse. It was getting late and he had so much to do it was pitiful. He had to get the casket out, drive someplace where no one could see him, open the casket, get the money—and then vanish.

South America maybe. Yes, he decided firmly, Rio de Janeiro. He'd simply disappear, give himself a new name, maybe grow a beard—vanish. Mascola would never think to look for him in South America. Mascola thought the world ended at the Nassau County line. He glanced at the gravediggers. Jesus, one tiny scoop of dirt at a time. They weren't even sweating.

Kelly walked back to them. "Anything in your union regulations about bonus money?"

The men paused and looked up at him. "What did you have in mind?" One of them asked cautiously.

"Twenty dollars each—on the casket lid."

"You've got yourself a deal, brother."

Andy Pascal squatted behind a tombstone with his gun in his hand. He was tense but not nervous—Andy Pascal was never nervous. He was anxious to get started. The thing was taking too long. He had been told to wait, but shit! He was freezing his ass off in the wet grass. He wished to hell he could change places with Tony who was down on the highway, seated in a warm car, with nothing to do but beep the horn four times if any cars turned into the cemetery. There had been one funeral about an hour before, a small one, a shiny black hearse and two limousines. Pascal had watched them crawl up the hill and continue on toward a distant grove of trees. They had come back in ten minutes. Shortest funeral in history, Pascal had thought. Probably just backed up to the grave and threw the poor bastard into it. Must have hated the sonofabitch. Now he heard the signal again, the four quick beeps, and looking down the narrow road he saw another funeral procession moving up the hill. This one was big, four limousines and a fleet of cars trailing after the hearse. It moved on past and Pascal watched until the last car disappeared from view in the far reaches of the cemetery. The place was getting too crowded and he could see how nervous Kelly was getting. He was jumping like a broad with a sniff of coke on her clit.

"Christ," he whispered harshly, "hurry up and dig the bastard up!"

Tony Foglio spotted Mascola's limousine and flipped his lights on and off in recognition. When the

limo turned into the entranceway, Foglio got out of his car and walked over to it.

"Well?" Mascola asked.

"Nobody come out yet," Foglio said, "but a lot of people just went in. Looked like they was buryin' the Mayor!"

"We'll have to risk it. We can't nail the bastard on the street."

Arthur Sharrett was apprehensive. He didn't like the tone of the conversation. "Risk what?"

Mascola dismissed Foglio with a gesture and then placed a comforting hand on Sharrett's bony shoulder.

"Nothing, Arthur. It's payday. A happy time."

The shovel clanged on metal, a dull, booming sound. It reverberated from the open grave like a bell.

"Got it, Mr. Kelly!"

Kelly ground out a cigarette under his foot and ran to the edge of the grave. His heart slammed. There it lay, still covered with a thin layer of dirt, but he could see the bronze gleaming dully.

"Get it up," he said hoarsely.

"Nother couple of minutes. Little more diggin' an' then we can get the wires on it."

A couple of minutes! The words were like poetry to Kelly. He ran to the hearse and backed it slowly across the dirt-strewn ground to within a few feet of the portable hoist that one of the men had rolled up to the hole. In just a few lousy minutes he'd be worth half a million. He wondered what it would work out to in pesos—or whatever the hell kind of money they used in Rio. Half a million *dollars*. Shit, he'd be able to buy the country for that.

Kelly shut off the engine, took the keys out of the

*Shaft's Big Score*

ignition and went around to the back of the hearse to unlock the rear door.

"Got a line on it," one of the men shouted. "Let's give her the heave-ho."

Kelly was starting to smile, but the smile froze on his face. As he unlocked the door and swung it outward, he saw a car reflected in the glass—a big, black limousine.

A couple of minutes, he thought wildly, that's all he needed—just a couple of minutes more. But he knew, in one section of his brain, that he had run out of time.

## 19

"Hello, Kelly."

It wasn't Mascola's voice, it was the voice of doom and Kelly knew it. He tugged at his collar to keep from choking.

"Gus . . . I figured it out . . . the money was . . . the money . . ."

The words sounded empty, hollow as balloons.

Mascola only smiled. "Have 'em bring it up, Kelly."

Kelly tried to moisten his lips, but his tongue was a dry stick.

"Sure, Gus. Sure." He turned quickly away from the sight of Mascola and Jerry Longo standing in front of the car. Wild thoughts raced through his head. The importance of the money had vanished from his mind. He thought only of flight—for life. Maybe if he ran

... down the path ... through the stone forest of gravestones ... maybe he could ... but there was Andy Pascal coming toward him, a gray-suited wraith holding a gun. Kelly groaned and closed his eyes.

"I said bring it up, Kelly." There was a note of amusement in Mascola's voice. "It's *our* money ain't it?"

"Sure, Gus. It's our money." His voice was so low he knew Mascola couldn't hear him. He also knew that it wouldn't have mattered. All words were meaningless now.

The two gravediggers climbed out of the hole and stuck their shovels into the mound of dirt. They paid no attention to the other people at the site, although the older man frowned when he saw Tony Foglio drive his Mustang off the road and onto the clipped grass.

"Bring up the coffin," Kelly said in a harsh whisper. "Put it in the hearse."

Mascola watched the coffin rise from the dark earth and swing free at the end of the small crane. Satisfied, he turned his back on the sight and opened the rear door of his car.

"Arthur, I'll help you out. I want you to see this."

"I can see all I want to see from here," Sharrett said coldly.

"No, Arthur. I want you to get a good view. You can lean on my arm if you have to."

Sharrett gritted his teeth. "Just help me out. I don't need anyone to lean on."

The gravediggers were getting uneasy. Neither of them felt comfortable about what was going on. They had both spotted Andy Pascal holding an automatic. Police? They couldn't be sure, but it didn't seem like-

ly. The cops didn't run around in yellow Mustangs or big limousines. They swung the crane toward the hearse and then shoved the casket onto the tracks in the back.

Andy Pascal stepped toward them, brandishing the gun.

"Both you guys . . . over by the hole."

The men hesitated, not knowing what to do.

"Move it!" Pascal snarled. He pointed his gun at the men and they stumbled toward the grave.

"You, too, Kelly," Mascola said.

Kelly looked around wildly for help—or pity. All that he saw were the grim, frozen faces of Mascola and his men, the terrified gravediggers and a crippled old man.

"Gus . . . for God's sake listen to me. . . ." He was begging for his life, crying for it. His words came in a rush, tumbling over each other, barely coherent. He wanted everyone to know how guiltless he was of duplicity—how innocent. When he finished babbling, the silence was painful.

"You're great, Kelly," Mascola laughed, "just great. Put a nickel in you and you'd say anything." His voice hardened and he pointed a finger at the hearse. "You knew the money was in that coffin because you put it there you sonofabitch! You were just tryin' to stiff me, you double-crossin' black bastard!"

"Gus! Stop this!" Arthur Sharrett walked slowly, painfully away from the side of the car. The great steel braces on his legs made him look like an ancient knight partially encased in armor. He moved stiff-legged to Mascola's side.

"If your money is in that casket, take it. Take it and let's get out of here. This has gone far enough."

"Now, Arthur, that isn't the point. I want you to

see how I do business—and how I deal with partners who try to screw me around."

Mascola drew a pistol from his pocket and cocked it. The act struck terror in the older gravedigger and he started to run.

"Get him!" Mascola yelled.

Andy Pascal grinned and fired. There was little sound. The silencer reduced the explosion to a harsh cough. The gravedigger stopped in full stride, spun on one heel and pitched forward into the grave, a spreading blossom of scarlet obscuring his face.

"God in heaven!" Sharrett whispered.

Mascola looked at him in triumph and contempt. "That's how I do it, Arthur. That's *my* way."

Tony Foglio heard it first—a distant roar, the screaming whine of tortured gears. He thought for a moment that there must be some kind of race going on nearby, maybe a dragster testing his machine down on the street. But the sound didn't fade. It grew louder, a deep-throated howl coming toward them. He walked away from his car and stood on the narrow asphalt road, clicking the hammer back on his revolver.

"Gus!" he shouted. "Somethin' comin'!"

"Then deal with it, jerk!" Mascola shouted back.

Foglio stepped into the center of the road and pointed his gun toward the crest of the low hill. He held the gun with both hands, very steady, the front sight resting on a point where the road dipped over the hill. He didn't know what the hell was going to top the rise in a second or two, but whatever it was he was ready for it.

The car was going to spoil him for any lesser form of transportation. Shaft was convinced of this as he

tooled the Ferrari up the twisting cemetery road.

"Having fun?" he yelled, turning the wheel violently. The car rocketed around a curve on two wheels.

Gail Sharrett smiled weakly as her slim body strained against the seat belt. She couldn't figure out the tall black man beside her. She wasn't sure if she liked him or hated him, but she was intrigued. He drove the car as though it was a part of his own body, as if some of his own force and energy were turning the wheels. She toyed with the thought of that machinelike energy being directed into her. She thought of her body screaming like the engine. It was a delicious vision. She was just reaching over to touch Shaft on the arm when the first slug from Tony Foglio's gun slapped a hole in the windshield and screamed past her head.

"Cocksucker!"

It happened too quickly for Shaft to do anything evasive. One moment there was nothing but the empty road ahead, and then he'd been over the hill and all shit was breaking loose. Shaft could see the man in the road, the cars and the hearse at the gravesite, men standing around, but it was all a blur, all coming up too fast. He hit the brake and sent the car in a long, gliding skid. Another bullet struck the car, tearing out a strip of metal from the back deck. Shaft caught a glimpse of Tony Foglio jumping out of the way of the skidding car, bringing his gun around. Shit! The bastard would have a clear shot from the side, *his* side. Shaft whipped the shotgun off his lap with one hand, rested the stock on the window frame and fired without taking time to aim. The recoil nearly tore the gun from his hand, and the explosion drowned out the sound of Gail's scream.

Tony Foglio took the charge full in his chest. He saw the red car sweep past him and then the spinning sky. It was his last sight on earth.

"It's Gail! Don't shoot! Don't shoot!" Sharrett's scream of anguish made Andy Pascal hesitate. He'd swung his pistol toward the car and had had the sights square on the driver when Sharrett yelled. But now he was uncertain—confused—and the clean shot was no longer possible. The car had picked up speed, roaring out of its spin and cutting sharply off the road.

*Now!* Kelly was a trapped animal with all of an animal's instincts for preservation and fight. For a split second no one was paying any attention to him. He wasn't going to die—not trapped like this. Grabbing one of the shovels he cocked his arm back, aimed the heavy implement for the side of Mascola's head not ten feet away from him and steeled himself to hurl it. The edge of the blade was sharp as a hatchet and the long wooden handle gave it balance. It was a deadly type of spear and it would have split Mascola's skull like a watermelon.

Mascola caught the movement out of the corner of his eye. He ducked, twisting his body to one side, shooting blindly from the hip. The gun barked three times and Albert J. Kelly died on his feet with a look of horror on his face. He pitched forward and the shovel fell from his lifeless hand and stuck blade down in the loose ground.

Gail Sharrett's scream was one long, unending note of pure terror. Shaft cursed the sound. It cut into him like a razor. He had to think and this broad was going to pieces on him. She was trying to claw at his arm, rip his hand from the wheel. She didn't know what she was doing. Shaft did her a favor—he swung

### *Shaft's Big Score*

the shotgun in a short arc and layed it across the side of her head. She slumped down on the seat at about the same instant Shaft hit the tombstone. He didn't mean to hit it, the damn thing just popped up in front of him as he tried to steer the car across the grass toward the hearse. The collision was a draw: the left front fender crumpled like a sheet of paper being wadded into a ball, and the tombstone lifted from the ground like a rotted tooth. The ride was over. It was the end of the line.

"Get that sonofabitch!"

Shaft couldn't see who was giving the orders. He was out of the car and running. Bullets snapped over his head like steel whips. He scrambled for the protection of a headstone. It wasn't Grant's tomb, just a plain marker no taller than his knee. But it was big enough. He reached it just as Andy Pascal found the range and began chipping an inscription on the stone with .38 slugs. Shaft lay on his side and pumped a round into the shotgun. He didn't expose himself in order to aim. He simply pushed the weapon around the side of the marker, pointed it in the general direction of the shooting and cut loose.

The pellets kicked up a whirlwind of dust and torn grass. A few pinged against the side of the hearse—and a small cluster tore into Arthur Sharrett's side.

"I've been shot!" He stared numbly at his bloody, pellet-ripped coat and then his legs gave way and he fell at Mascola's feet. "Help me, Gus! Help me!"

"Fuck it!"

Mascola was already moving away, running in a low crouch toward the open back door of the hearse.

"Freeze, you sonofabitch!"

Mascola couldn't believe it. One second there had been nothing to stop him from reaching the casket,

### *Shaft's Big Score*

and the next second he was blocked. The nigger in the grass was on his knees, the lower part of his body hidden by a tombstone. Mascola stopped running. He was wondering if he could shoot before the nigger cut loose on him with the scattergun.

"Don't try it," Shaft said, reading his mind. "Throw your gun away."

Mascola did as he was told.

"You're bright," Shaft said. "Now tell your goons to cool it or I'll chop you into hamburger."

Mascola swallowed hard, never taking his eyes off the shotgun. He'd been around; he knew what a gun like that could do to a man.

"Andy—Jerry—hold your fire. I'm makin' a deal with Shaft."

Shaft rose cautiously to his feet. "You're not making a deal with anyone, you stupid bastard. Get in the hearse with the coffin."

Mascola hesitated, but only for an instant. Move or die. He moved.

Neither Pascal nor Longo were in a position to help. Pascal lay behind the mound of earth beside the grave, keeping his head down. He might have jumped up and tried for a shot, but he didn't like the odds. Shaft might be ready for him and blow his head off. He pressed closer to the damp earth and waited.

Longo was in an even worse spot. He couldn't see Shaft because the hearse blocked his view. He dropped down to his hands and knees and crawled behind the limousine. Arthur Sharrett was lying near him, groaning, but he ignored the old man.

Shaft grinned. Holding the shotgun in front of him he moved quickly to the back of the hearse and slammed the door. He was surprised to see the keys

*Shaft's Big Score*

dangling from the lock. He had counted on them being in the ignition. The sight was sobering. What if they had been in Kelly's pocket? He felt a tingle in his spine as he plucked the keys from the lock and backed slowly—very slowly—toward the front of the hearse.

## 20

Andy Pascal couldn't believe it. Everything had been going one hundred percent and then, in a flash, it had all gone sour. His throat burned with suppressed rage. He thought of emptying his gun at the big hearse as Shaft spun it in a tight U-turn that smoked the asphalt, but he held his fire. Jesus! The boss was in there.

"Let's get 'em!"

Jerry Longo's voice—a howl of fury. Pascal raced across the grass toward the limousine. That fool Sharrett was writhing on the ground, calling to him, begging him to stop and help. Let the old fart die.

"Hang on," Jerry Longo said tightly as Pascal clambered into the front seat beside him. "I'm goin' to run that dinge right off the fuckin' road."

"Gus is in there."

"Fuck Gus," Longo muttered. "That's the nigger that killed Sal. I'm going to light that sonofabitch."

A funeral procession was turning off the highway and entering the cemetery as Shaft hurtled down the hill. He was amazed at the power he was getting out of the hearse. Shit, he was tooling along like a stock-car racer. He hoped the thing would handle like one. It was going to be a tight squeeze with a few tricky turns and twists. A real slalom. He held one hand on the horn as he headed straight for the lead car—a hearse just like his own, but a sedate old lady of a hearse. The driver cut to the right a split second before Shaft jerked his wheel to the right. They scraped a little paint and Shaft caught a fleeting glimpse of the other driver's face. He looked deader than his passenger. The rest of the cars scattered to the edge of the road like a herd of terrified sheep—and suddenly he was past them all and turning onto the highway, laying track.

Beautiful! Shaft felt intoxicated. He was drunk with the feel of power. First the Ferrari—as a cocktail. And now this gleaming brute of a wagon for the main course. He jammed his foot to the floorboards and felt the rear wheels dig into the road. There was a hell of a lot of traffic up ahead. The thought made Shaft smile.

Pascal broke into a cold sweat. He had all the guts in the world, but not for this. Longo wasn't driving—he was flying.

"I'm gonna hang in close!" Longo screamed. "Pop a tire!"

Pascal could catch only fleeting glimpses of the hearse. It was far ahead of them on the crowded

### *Shaft's Big Score*

highway, but Longo was picking up yardage. He was weaving through the traffic at over ninety, cutting ahead of cars with only inches to spare, passing on the wrong side of the road. Fearless. Oblivious to the scream of brakes or the blasting panic of horns.

"He's turning off," Longo said. "We'll get the sonofabitch now."

Pascal could see the hearse turn sharply off the road into a narrow street and disappear from view.

Shaft had spotted the limousine after him. There was no point in trying to outrun it. He had to lose it, off the main road, in the twisting paths of the city. Shaft knew what it was like to have someone coming after him. The lessons of escape were bred into his bones.

"Shaft! A deal! For Christ's sake, man! I'm willing to deal!"

Shaft smiled—a razor-thin grin. Mascola had been screaming since they left the cemetery, pounding on the glass-walled partition. He wanted to deal, wanted to make everything right, but he couldn't put Cal back together again. Shaft wasn't making any deals. Maybe the cops couldn't beat a confession out of the bastard, but Shaft could. When he was finished Mascola would be glad to get in a cell. He'd beg them to lock him up—throw away the key—anything to get away from Shaft's wrath.

Shaft didn't see the taxi until it was too late. It shot out from an alley and Shaft didn't have time to even tickle the brakes. He hit the taxi on the tip of the front fender and spun it around like a top. Mascola screamed when they hit, falling to the floor in terror.

"Enjoy the ride, cocksucker!" Shaft yelled over his shoulder. "This is your last one!"

### *Shaft's Big Score*

Shit, he thought soberly. It was probably going to be *his* as well. Why the hell did there have to be so many cars on the street? Why did he have to run into them? He swerved to avoid a Volkswagen pulling out from the curb, but caught it on the side and slapped it back. He drove a motorcycle onto the sidewalk and a shiny new Plymouth into the back end of a bus. He was leaving a trail of destruction and all the hoods in the limo had to do was follow it. He turned into an alley, crushing a fender against a wall before he could straighten the hearse out. The alley was empty except for trash cans. Fuck the trash cans. He sent them spinning ahead of him, busted tin flying through the air like shrapnel.

The street at the end of the alley was wider than the one he had just left. Shaft recognized it as being a main route to La Guardia Airport and the docks on Bowery Bay. He knew of quiet spots out there at the end of the airport or along the abandoned wharves. He slowed as he turned into the street, hoping to just blend into the traffic, but a glance in the rear-view mirror changed all plans. The limousine was rocketing into the alley behind him and coming like a runaway train.

"Shoot!" Jerry Longo shouted.

There was time for only one fast shot before the hearse completed its turn. Andy Pascal leaned out the side of the window and fired. He could see the bullet hit. The oval window framed with gray curtains dissolved into a spray of glass.

"You missed him!"

"I hit the car, for Christ's sake." What the fuck did Longo expect him to do? It had been an almost impossible shot. Eighty miles an hour down a narrow alley.

### *Shaft's Big Score*

Shaft had the gas pedal as far down as it would go. He pushed for more. He tried to shove it clear through the floor. He was going close to a hundred and it still wasn't fast enough. The limousine was inching up on him. There was no point in trying to drive evasively at that speed. If he turned the wheel a little too much he'd flip the car like a coin. No point in trying to avoid other cars either. He held his hand on the horn—and prayed.

"Hold it steady!" Pascal was terrified of falling. He was leaning out the window, trying to keep the gun steady with both hands. The wind smashing against him threatened to whip him away like a scrap of paper—and that fucker Longo couldn't keep the fuckin' car going in a straight line. "Steady! Steady!"

Longo cursed his partner under his breath, twisted the wheel in order to pass a truck, then steadied the car the best he could. It was a rotten road, pitted and scarred. It was a truck route. It wasn't designed for cars going one hundred and thirty-five miles an hour. But he was gaining on the hearse . . . cutting the bastard's lead.

"Get the tires!"

Pascal fired—slowly and methodically. When he emptied his gun, he reached onto the seat and took Longo's.

Shaft felt the hammer blows of the slugs. The bullets tore the glass out of the back, smashed the windshield, ricocheted off the bronze casket. He ducked his head, driving by instinct, waiting for the splintering pain of white-hot lead to enter his spine.

"You've got trigger-happy friends!" Shaft yelled.

Mascola didn't answer. He lay stretched out beside Cal's coffin. The right side of his head was missing. A

coroner would say there had been probable brain damage before death.

He was fucked. Shaft knew it the moment he turned off the road. He had locked himself into a one-lane street lined with empty warehouses. No space between them. No alleys. No place to go but straight ahead—toward the dirty, gray waters of Bowery Bay and the upper East River. He stood on the brakes as the road ended and the wooden wharf began. The hearse skidded in a tire-burning panic stop that left Shaft three feet short of a cold bath. He almost fell out of the car and knelt beside it. The limousine was coming flat out, bumping and rocking down the street. It looked as big as a tank—and just as powerful.

Shaft stood up slowly, pumping a shell into the shotgun. This was really it. Shaft's last stand.

Jerry Longo only made one mistake—he drove onto the wharf. The car was his weapon. He wanted to drive it clear through the nigger, smash him against the grill like a bug—or watch the sonofabitch run, screaming, right into the river.

Shaft made it easy for him. He walked into the center of the wharf and waited. The limousine bored straight at him and when it was fifty feet away Shaft raised the shotgun and fired it as fast as he could work the pump.

Jerry Longo died from the first shot. The charge shredded the windshield and pushed splintered glass ahead of it. Lead pellets and a razor spray of glass shaved Longo's head from his body. Andy Pascal saw it happen, but he never had time to scream. The next two blasts caught him in the chest, tossing him over the seat like a broken doll. He was dead before the car hurtled off the end of the wharf and dove gracefully toward the dark and oily water.

Detective Sergeant Bollin ground a cigarette into the dirt and resumed his slow pacing. It was quiet in the cemetery now that the ambulances had left, quiet and peaceful. Bollin had elected to stick around. He was waiting for Shaft to come back or waiting for the radio to inform him that Shaft wasn't coming back—not standing up, anyhow. Either way was all right with Bollin. He kept telling himself that. He didn't want to like Shaft, not in any way at all. The guy was a real pain in the ass and if you got to like him, you'd have to learn to put up with him, tolerate him, make excuses for him. Bollin did not intend being another Vic Anderozzi. But when he heard the sound of a car and saw the battered hearse come limping over the hill he couldn't help but grin.

"Well?" he asked. "You got anything to tell me?"

Shaft slid out from behind the wheel. "What's to tell?"

Bollin followed Shaft to the back of the hearse and helped him open the bullet-pocked door. Gus Mascola's corpse wasn't pretty, but Bollin gazed at it in outright fondness.

"He did it, you know. Gus and his boys had a way with explosives."

"Yeah," Shaft said. "Maybe Cal asked for it. I don't know. But it's all over now. I want Cal to rest."

Bollin shrugged and lit another cigarette. "Suits me."

"Just one thing. There's a limousine in Bowery Bay . . . end of the Forty-eighth Street wharf. You'll find a couple of guys in it."

"I won't break my ass looking for 'em. Want some help?"

"Yeah."

A little clumsily they slid the coffin out on the

tracks to the small crane and lowered it slowly into the ground. There was blood on it, two bullet holes in one end. Well, it hadn't bothered Cal Asby any. And it didn't bother Shaft.

"Want some help?"

"No," Shaft said picking up the shovel and beginning to restore the earth to its place. As a blanket for the dead. It was the least and the best he could do.

They discussed it in the taxi going over to Queens. He was taking her home, just as he'd promised.

"Not a penny," she said softly. "There's going to be a real Asby Foundation—for crippled kids. I'll build a school with that money. I want that money to do some good, make up for all the bad it did. And I don't want any of it."

Shaft wasn't going to argue with her. Personally, he would have built a school *and* gone to London or Paris.

"What will you do now, Johnnie?"

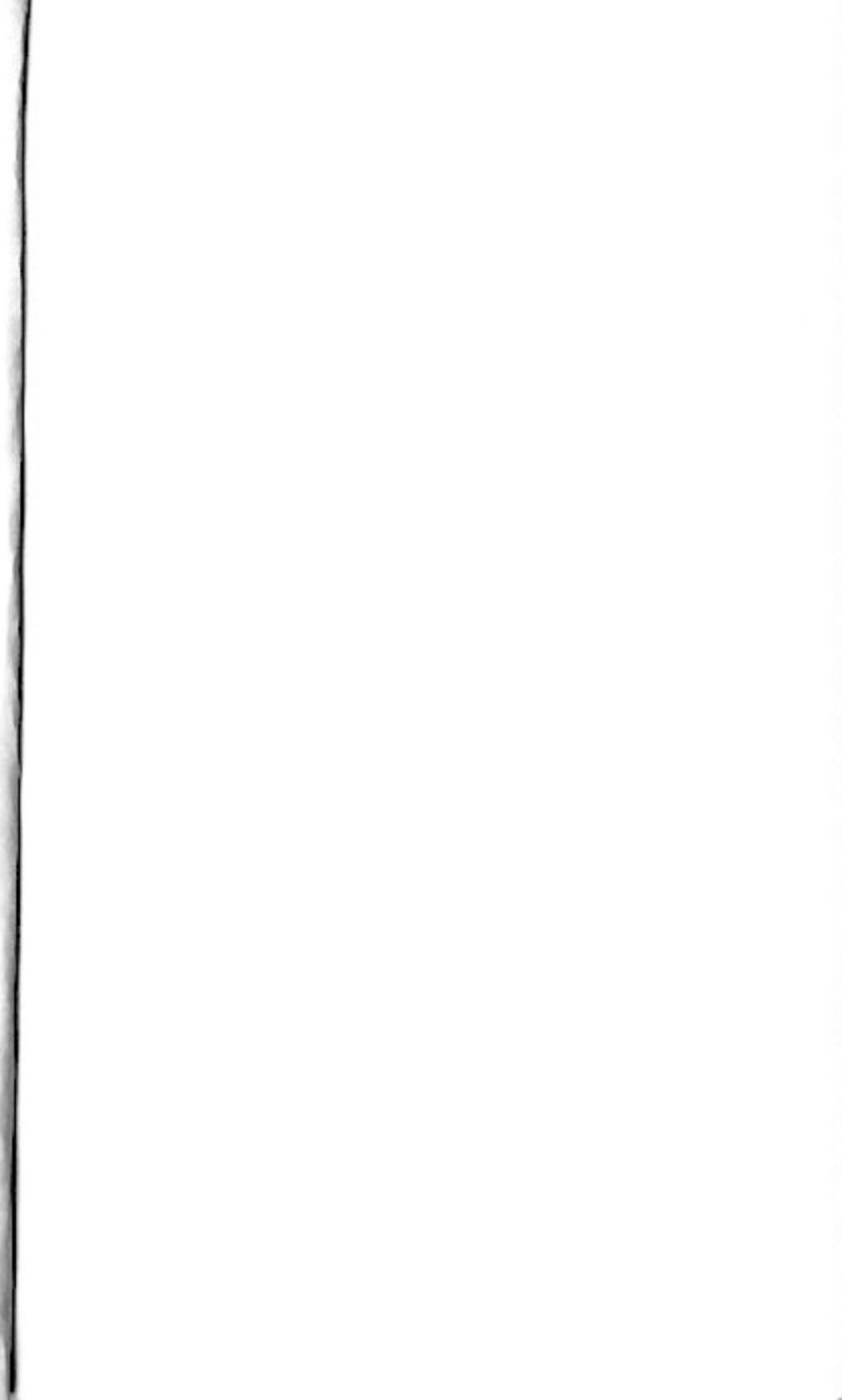
"Something."

She moved closer to him on the seat. "I'm going to need help. Just for a few days. There are so many things to do."

"I'll be around," he said, "but I got some things to catch up on, too."

His jaw hurt. One of the kicks he had taken. Maybe a filling was loose. At any rate, he'd been thinking about the dental technician down the hall from his office. He had helped her with her nervous tension, hadn't he?

And fair was fair, wasn't it?



# SHAFT'S BIG SCORE

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